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HER ELEPHANT MAN

To
MISS BIRD MILLMAN

*beloved idol of The Greatest on Earth,
whose beauty of face is only excelled
by the beauty of her soul; whose smile
seems never to weary, and whose
winged feet seem never to tire, I dedi-
cate this book with love for the girl
and admiration for the artist.*

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*"I feel like the cinnamon
bear must have felt that
time some one fed him
tobacco when he thought
he was getting a carrot."*

HER ELEPHANT MAN

A STORY OF THE SAWDUST RING

BY
PEARL DOLES BELL

Author of "His Harvest."

Illustrated by George Brehm



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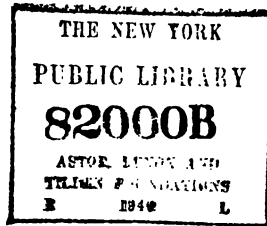
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THE ILLUSTRATIONS

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"I feel like the cinnamon bear must have
felt that time some one fed him tobacco
when he thought he was getting a carrot." . *Frontispiece*

"Gone!" Blake leaned triumphantly toward
her. "But nobody knows where." 1

Never had she seemed so ethereal, yet never
more palpitatingly vital. It was as though
a spirit of mad joy had entered into the
dancer 2

HER ELEPHANT MAN

CHAPTER I

A DAUGHTER OF THE BIG TOP

LITTLE JOAN KENNERLY—ridiculously young, alert and brown as a Kansas gopher, and star of the Farnum and Williams' Greatest Show on Earth—stood in the door of a small tent near the menagerie and looked out across the circus lot at the returning procession which had just finished parading the main streets of Ottumwa.

There was mutiny in the fascinatingly piquant face that was delicately oval and delicately bronzed. There was stormy rebellion in the bronze eyes in whose warm depths were glints of gold and flecks of red and yellow. Impudent little curls of red-brown hair clung with damp tenacity to the broad, low forehead and were unheeded. An angry pulse beat visibly at the base of the throat where an adorable little hollow lay like a faint shadow between two slender cords which marked the neck from the boyish breast to the saucy face. The small tanned hands picked petulantly at a guy line that ran from the canvas above her head to the stake at her feet.

"It isn't true!" she was saying for the hundredth time. "It isn't true! Trixie Snyder is a—a—you know!" She

turned brooding eyes to the guy rope. "She is! You know she is! And you needn't try to preach—" as the rope vibrated under her trembling fingers. "I'm not a heathen, and I guess I know when there ought to be what you'd call a—a benefit of a doubt. I'm just as mag—magnanimous as you are. Maybe I'm *magnanimouser*!"

The corners of the red mouth lifted whimsically.

"But when somebody tells a—a—you know—a three letter word like—*fib*, only worse, I guess I don't have to believe it."

An animal wagon was making its way into the menagerie tent a few feet away, and behind it came a pony with a monkey perched on its glossy back. Joan and the monkey eyed each other defiantly for an instant; then the pony moved forward and was gone, and Joan's gaze came back to the guy line that slanted past her shoulder.

"Do you believe it?" she challenged the rope stormily. "Do you?" She shook it threateningly. "Because if you do believe it, I'll—I'll cut you in two. You've got to have loyalty to them"—she nodded her head toward the busy lot—"same as they've had it for you. Haven't they been good to you and me? Well then! I reckon we're not going to believe what Trixie Snyder—"

"You called me?" A blond girl in Grecian trappings leaned over the gilded side of a stalled chariot, her blue eyes indifferent to the fire in the golden brown ones.

"Called you!" Joan Kennerly's slim little body stiffened. "I—I'd as soon call Zetta's meanest lion. Cats are all a—like."

The eyes still blazed but there was an unmistakable tremble to the sweetly curved lips, and the only member

of the Greatest on Earth who did not love her glanced curiously at the tense little face and smiled maliciously.

"You've still that dreadful temper, haven't you? And you're getting too big for it, just as you're getting too big to be forever hanging around Philip Dorset's office like this. I can't understand what old Kennerly is thinking about to permit it. It's positively—"

"Oh!" interrupted Joan making an eloquent gesture, "somebody has to be here to keep the chariot drivers away. You see, one of them seems to think that Phil is her Mark Antony. I'm on guard. Honest truly, I am! And I've strict orders to throw to the wild beasts any lady—"

"Guard are you! Oh!" The chariot lady made big apologetic eyes. "And I've been thinking you were a—*circus girl—a hybrid!* Stupid of me, wasn't it?"

Joan clung tightly to the guy line lest she give vent to the passion that was rioting within her. She wanted desperately to fly at that chariot and wreck it. She wanted passionately to feel under her sharp little nails the pink flesh of this woman who had put a troubled wonder in her heart. Her eyes smarted and her throat hurt.

"They're not true—those things you said this morning in the dressing room! They—they're not true!"

"Aren't they?" The procession was crawling on again, and the chariot driver was busy with the reins of her three sweat-lathered horses. "Ask your 'elerphunt man,'" she called back across her shoulder; "maybe he'll tell you they are!"

Joan Kennerly made a *mouse* at the Grecian robed figure, then she stamped a tiny foot angrily.

"No wonder Bud Snyder couldn't go on being her husband and balancer of her perch-pole. He—he'd just naturally have had to murder her!"

Impatiently she pushed the curls of copper tinted hair out of her smarting eyes, straightened her boyish young figure as though defying the onslaught of the violent emotions doing battle within her, and looked determinedly out again across the lot.

The caravan had moved a few paces forward and was once more stalled. Men in khaki overalls, with bared heads and sweat-streaked faces, were running helter-skelter, unloading paraphernalia. Men in snug-fitting gray uniforms were issuing crisp orders, emphasizing them by gesticulations of riding crops. Men in Arabian robes, with swarthy faces and perfectly wound turbans, were climbing down from floats or urging their camels to kneel. Women in stuffy velvets and dust-clouded spangles, and others in leather skirts and rough rider hats waited languidly there in the sun on dais or saddle, or slid wearily to the ground and wormed their way in and out through the animal cages and floats toward the sheltering brown sidewalls of the dressing-tent which lay beyond the back doors of the Big Top.

From out front came the noises of the crowds upon the side-walks, and from far down the street came the "Home Sweet Home" of the steam calliope. Joan, listening, felt vaguely that this "Home Sweet Home" meant something to that crowd out front that it did not mean to her, and against the puzzled wonder in her heart there rose a furious, inconsistent denial, and a merciless self-arrangement.

"As if there *could* be any difference between ropes and picket fences!" She stamped her foot emphatically. "As if Granny Wilson, who sews on buttons for clowns, or Trixie's poor little mother, who works all day over tinsel and spangles, weren't just the same *inside* as the butcher's mother who knits warm jackets and the—the bricklayer's wife who bakes nice griddle cakes! I won't believe it! So there."

She turned her back to the unresponsive guy line, and though she began to hum a gay little tune there was troubled questioning in the wide eyes that looked out over the only family she had ever known.

Elephants shambled onto the lot, swinging their long trunks rhythmically. Clowns ran this way and that. A tired band, its jaunty step deserting it outside on the street, limped morosely in the wake of its leader, who was glancing half-heartedly off to where a flag at the top of the cook tent was now waving its signal to the hungry. Again the procession halted and again it moved on.

Of a sudden the girl near the menagerie leaned forward eagerly, shading her eyes with her hand. Then she whistled shrilly. From somewhere behind the Big Top came an answer, a sort of "I hear you calling me," and around the canvas sidewall that shimmered dazzlingly white in the August noonday sun there swung a tall, good-looking man in English tweeds.

The tenseness went from Joan Kennerly's slender body, and the fire in the topaz eyes died down to the faintest smolder. He was coming—her "elerphunt man," who had always made everything right since that first night when he had become a part of the circus—that night in

Madison Square Garden when he had found her crooning to her dolly, dangerously near to the back doors of the arena. She remembered how he had smiled at her then, and how he had promised to mend the dolly's broken arm, and how, from that moment on, he'd shared her Uncle Jeremy's duties toward stubbed toes, measles, broken dollies, mumps and mashed fingers. And she wondered now, as he swung up beside her, if he could set her world back where it had been this morning.

"How many times have I told you, Joan, not to stand in the sun when it isn't necessary?" the man demanded, his cool gray eyes trying to read the elusive, unfamiliar thing that was veiling the natural radiance of the small face lifted to his.

"I don't know, elerphunt man. I've not counted. Besides," Joan smiled triumphantly, "it was necessary."

The man pushed her gently ahead of him into the small office tent.

"Now," he said with mock dignity, gravely laying his panama hat on a table near the door, "the court is ready to hear the case. Defendant, please!"

Joan's lovely head bent forward in pretended nervousness, and she traced something on the table with a pink finger-tip. Then suddenly:

"I don't want to—to play *make-believe*! I—I don't want to *play* anything! I—I guess I want to—to cry! Do—circuses allow stars—to cry, Philip?" she raised her face beseechingly. "Stars can't ride in pageants, and—and there are such a lot of things they can't do. And when you're all choked up inside—and—and——"

"Whatever are you talking about, child?" Philip Dorset

laid down the pipe which he had just picked up and strode around the corner of the table.

Joan was suddenly ashamed of her treason. She had threatened to cut in two the guy line outside if it dared be disloyal to the F. & W., and here was she ready to believe what some old Trixie had said about what some old world *thought!*

"We'll go on with the case!" For an instant the corners of the crimson mouth dimpled. "The defendant, Your Honor, is D— Please, Your Honor, may I say it just this once?"

"Say what?" Philip Dorset allowed his gaze to feast for a second on the riotous hair with its glints of gold and its gorgeous sunset coloring.

"You know! It begins with a D and ends with an M."

"Joan!"

"Yes, Your Honor. But I do want to say it just this once. It's been sort of hankering round inside me all day. Don't you think it'd be safer out of me than—than it is *in* me?"

"Joan! What has happened to make you want to say ugly words?" The cool gray eyes held her burning bright ones.

"But it isn't so ugly, Philip, at least not so very. There's lots of words uglier. For instance—"

"Hush! Whatever has got into you, Joan Kennerly!"

"That—that *word*, Mr. Dorset. And if—you'd only let me say it just this once, it'd help—maybe a lot." She smiled at him bravely, but the smile was wobbly and uncertain.

"Ugly words aren't permitted this side the ropes, and

you know very well, young lady, that Lawson fines pretty heavily for them."

Joan sighed.

"Yes, I know." She looked out through the door at a patch of hazy blue sky, her brave smile stiffening. "I know. A—a boarding school couldn't have more law and—and order, could it, Phil? But I wonder"—the smile faded and the amber eyes, lifted suddenly to his, widened with seriousness and grew childishly wistful—"what difference it can make if a circus girl does say ugly words. I reckon not saying them doesn't help in the least to make her a—a lady!"

The muscles in the man's sinewy body went taut and his gray eyes narrowed ominously.

"Do you know what you are saying, Joie? Where did you hear such stuff?"

"What does it matter? The only wonder is that Uncle Jerry and you have managed to keep me from hearing the thing before."

"What thing?" Philip Dorset caught her shoulders in his slender, muscular hands.

"That—that the world outside the ropes doesn't know us. Oh, Philip! Is it true that the world believes we're wicked and—and vulgar? That circus women are—are"—she puckered her brow thoughtfully in her endeavor to remember the word Trixie had used—"hybrids—*mon-grels*?"

Philip Dorset said something under his breath.

So that was it! Some one had dared tell her *that*!

"Who told you this stuff, Joie?" His fingers dug into her shoulders. "Tell me, dear. Who told you?"

His well cut mouth set in a hard, straight line.

Joan looked back at him with dilating eyes, and as she looked some odd intangible thing seemed to rise up between them.

Philip did not belong to sawdust and tinsel. Philip, she was sure, had been something fine and big, back in that other life of which he never spoke. Philip—her Philip—was a gentleman—clean and—and polished and—and all those other nice things that went toward making gentlemen. And *she* was—a choked little sob came to her throat—a *mongrel*. She didn't even know who her parents had been, and she—*she* had belonged always to canvas and rigging!

"Is it true, Phil? Is it? I—want to know, Philip."

Her elephant man looked back at her with unreadable eyes. The fingers that gripped her shoulders relaxed a little. He even forced a laugh.

"Why, Joan, there was a time when the public was prejudiced against circus folk. Against actor folk, too. But that day is past. Now it weighs all artists with the same scales, whether it is the painter who creates a fine picture, a composer who writes beautiful music, or that man or that woman who can dwarf for an hour another's burden or care. When Shakespeare—"

"Then," Joan's eager little face flushed excitedly, "riding my Ted in the center ring doesn't make me any different from the girl who sells perfumes and laces across the counters of shops?"

"Not a bit, Joie dear! Not one bit!"

"Oh, I'm glad! I'm so glad, Philip!" She jumped up and down in her excitement. "When I heard it I—Oh,

Philip, I just wanted a mother—I wanted to put my head in her lap and—and cry. It—it's getting lonesome not having a mother, Phil. Seems like as if mothers always make things right. But you've made this thing right, haven't you, elerphunt man?"

She clapped her hands joyously against his breast, yet even in that moment of bubbling ecstasy there slunk in a corner of her heart an obstinate doubt.

"You see, Phil, I didn't care so much about it—so long as it didn't make *you* like me less. And you—you would never like me less, would you, Phil? Never—no matter what kind of a mongrel the world said I was?"

Philip's hands dropped heavily to his sides, and he looked away from the wistful face lifted so appealingly to his. He could not look at the sweet eyes, grown pathetically eager, without taking the slight young figure up in his hungry arms. And Joan was getting too big for his caresses now.

"Nothing can ever make me care less for you, Joie. Nothing! You are my little girl, just as you are your Uncle Jeremy's, and I shall care for you always. But you must trust me. As you grow older you will hear many strange things. Bring them to me, Joan, or to your Uncle Jeremy or to Granny Wilson. Be sure, dear, we'll tell you all that you need to know. And if ever"—there was sudden savagery in his voice, but the girl before him liked it; in some inexplicable way it seemed to soothe her—"I find who has told you this rot, I'll—"

"But it doesn't matter now, Phil. And I'll trust you always, always! You've kissed the hurt place again, Philip, and—and made it well."

She tilted back her small head and raised her sweet face temptingly. The red mouth invited mutely, like the innocent unafraid lips of a child. But Philip Dorset turned from her abruptly.

"And now about that ugly word, Miss Defendant." Once more he was the judge frowning austerely upon her. "You will never want to say it again?"

Joan shook her lovely head dubiously.

"I'm afraid I shall, Your Honor."

"Then it's no good scolding you, Miss Kennerly."

"No good at all, sir."

Philip rested his well shaped hands on the table and smiled at her.

"You are incorrigible!" reprovingly.

"I'm afraid so!" sorrowfully.

"And you're a fraud!"

"I know it." She smiled ruefully. Then she wrinkled her little nose at him. "I'm no better than my dolls were, Philip, only I guess I'm stuffed with temper instead of sawdust. But that word: you know I wanted to say it about something else, too. I wanted to say it because Lawson says a star can't ride in parade, and you and Uncle Jerry insist that Joans—"

"And angels do not belong in pageants?"

"Yes! As if," she crinkled her eyes and looked out at him through a veil of thick curling lashes, "Joans and angels would fall off the old floats, or—or not fit comfortably between the humps of camels. The fun of parading streets or riding in the spec in the Big Top isn't for them, you say. It isn't fair, and I've made a wish about it over my right shoulder at three new moons, and—"

still I'm not allowed to play Cleopatra, or Joan of Arc or—or anything."

"But—"

"Oh yes, I know! There is *but*!" she laughed a bit uncertainly. "There are such a lot of buts, aren't there? And I guess the longer you live the more buts you meet. And I reckon when you're seventeen you meet them in bunches."

A tight feeling was in her throat once more but since she didn't know why it was there she refused to recognize it. Raising her fingers to her lips she blew her "elephant man" a kiss, then out through the doorway she danced, whistling shrilly as she went.

Like a sunbeam she flitted away beyond the guy ropes of the Big Top, down the cinder-strewn path toward a great wide-spreading tent at the very top of which a flag signalled lazily.

Philip Dorset moved slowly to his door that he might keep the dancing will-o'-the-wisp within his range of vision, and over his face there spread the faintest cloud, like a thin gray mantle.

He was good to look upon, was this Philip. He was tall, and lithe as an Indian, with a physical cleanliness that would have delighted the eye of an æsthete. His skin was old ivory where sun and winds had tanned it. His mouth was contradictorily grim, tender, austere—with a satirical twist at the corners. His hair was black and crisply thick, and his eyes were gray and clear as limpid waters, yet with that baffling opacity of ice under a wintry moon. Instead of windows they were but mirrors when one looked too deeply into them, and one never

saw behind them into the recesses of the man's soul where crouched the hidden story of his life.

When this Philip Dorset had just come of age he had married on impulse a woman several years his senior, and almost at once he had discovered his mistake. The woman loved some one else—some one whose purse was less fat than his! Immediately he had gone away, putting an ocean and a sea between himself and his wife. In India he had become ill with a fever and report had traveled back to America that he had died. When he returned to his native land a little later, it was to learn that his wife, believing herself to be a widow, had married again—this time the man with the slender purse. And very gravely his lawyers had informed him that a child was expected. For a long moment he had sat silent before his legal advisers, then passing his hand with a characteristic gesture across his eyes, he had told them his decision. He would go away. They were to continue to pay her the widow's share of the income of his estate, and she was never to know the truth. He had turned deaf ears to his attorneys' entreaties, and determinedly he had gone away.

The circus happened to be in Madison Square Garden at the time, and it happened also to be in need of an elephant trainer. Knowing the elephant as he did, he offered himself to the manager and was accepted. Thus it was that the F. & W. had swallowed the identity of one Philip Warner, millionaire, horseman, hunter of big game, and scion of a fine old New York family, and added to its list of artists and artisans one Philip Dorset, elephant trainer.

Cynicism and reticence took the place of faith and candor, and the Philip Dorset of the circus was quiet and grave whereas Philip Warner of New York had been gay and laughter loving. And the F. & W., knowing nothing of the man's story, puzzled and wondered. But the puzzling and wondering of eight years had brought the F. & W. no nearer to the man's hidden story.

Something in his grave face forbade the curious to question, and that something had been his armor, his barricade, during all these years. It had walled up his past as the husband in one of Balzac's stories walled up the man who was hidden in his wife's boudoir closet. Thus the charred past which he had brought to the Greatest Show on Earth was left unmolested in its charnel house behind the inscrutable gray eyes.

Occasionally some strange current of emotion stirred that handful of ash, but the man kept a careful watch outside his charnel house lest some one see his restless dead—the dead whose ghosts stirred oftenest when Joan Kennerly was near. It was Joan who made them rise up in a howling babel of regrets. The touch of her hand on his, the fleeting caress of her sun-kissed hair as it swept his cheek, the sound of her clear young voice as it called out his name—these were the things that scaled the barricades of Philip Dorset, elephant trainer, and pushed deep into the soul of Philip Warner, the man.

Now, as he stood there staring after her, he recalled those days when she had sat here in his tent, learning history and Latin and all the things she had hated, but which she had thirsted to know just because he knew

them; and a thousand little memories of her sweetness, her storms, her difficult questions and her naïve philosophy, came back to him.

He remembered that night following the one on which Madame Le Bert had been carried lifeless from the Big Top and the F. & W. had made Joan, featured, daring little equestrienne, the new star. He had stood with old Kennerly in the padroom near the wide back doors of the Big Top, and had looked in at the center ring where a mere slip of a girl, in swirling pink draperies, was dancing on the sleek back of a running horse. She had come out to them under a storm of applause, going straight into Jerimy's trembling old arms. Then she had come to *him*! For a moment they were silent as he held her two hot little hands in his, then she had whispered:

"Were you proud of me, Phil?" And he had looked down into the flushed, upturned face and had wanted to crush her in one mad embrace.

"Very proud, Joan!" he had said. "But—"

"But?" Joan had prompted. And he had needed to turn his eyes from her wondering gaze as he answered:

"But you never again can be my little playmate. Lawson has let you leap through a hoop into womanhood."

She had been hurt at his words, he remembered; but better that he should hurt her so, than that he should ever say and do the things he had so wanted to say and do.

"And now," he moved back into the little tent, "it's getting close to the time when I shall have to go out of her life. It isn't fair to trouble her with—with that which is behind me. It—it isn't fair! But for the—child—it—"

might have been. But as it is—I—can be no less than a —*man*.” He sank upon a stool and buried his face in his hands.

“Some day,” he whispered to the ache in his heart, “when she’s older—when she’s married perhaps, and—happy—she’ll come to understand—that—I *cared*. But the knowledge must—come of itself. I can never tell her. Never say to her the things that—other men will say!”

Noonday sounds of the lot but faintly penetrated his consciousness, as he sat there with bowed head. The sharp commands of a keeper behind the canvas of the menagerie were drowned by the sudden trumpeting of an elephant. The trumpeting ceased and a hum of voices came from the ticket wagons at the end of the lane of side-shows, where ticket men were counting silver and stacking tickets for the afternoon show.

“Something must have been wrong with the rigging last night because he got up to the straps and then refused to work. The prop man says—”

Two men were passing on their way across the lot, then once again there was only the sibilant buzz from the ticket wagons.

Philip Dorset picked up his straw hat and made his way slowly down the cinder path under the blazing sun. He was wondering just how much longer he would dare to remain so close to temptation—so near to the thing that gave him such exquisite pleasure and such poignant pain; and his face was even more carefully immobile than usual.

Half way to the cook tent, some one called his name and he turned and halted as there came puffing up to him

old Jerimy Kennerly, foster uncle of the small F. & W. star, and head of the F. & W. horse department—slave to the one and master to the other—ostentatiously, determinedly gruff, guiltily, shame-facedly tender, short of body and long of profanity, with no other gods than Joan and horse-flesh.

"I reckon everybody in the county'll be out to-day, spite of the heat." Jerimy mopped his florid, weather-beaten old face with a limp cotton handkerchief. "They don't seem to be nothin' that'll keep them away this season," he went on pantingly, trying to keep pace with Philip who was moving on again.

"We've used eight poles every day since we left the Garden and that's goin' some for the old rag. I've seen seasons when she ain't had more'n six poles up from openin' to closin'. But this year the old U. S. 'pears to be dead set on circuses—kind of got a fever for them—and we ain't left out a inch of canvas nor a single blue or red seat. I reckon if it gets hot enough to blister the paint off'n them seats, they'll still be somebody a-settin' on each one of them."

Philip laughed.

"How'd your end of the parade come out? Anything happen?" he asked.

"Nothin' 'cept the usual. Same old trouble with the hippo wagon. She got stuck fast at the first hill that wa'n't no bigger'n that"—Jerimy made a stubby square hand into a chunk of a fist—"and we had to side-track until the rest of the parade had passed. Then we snuk her back here to the lot, where she waited for her turn to be put away."

They had reached the huge tent from which proceeded the rattle and clash of dishes, and Jerimy paused and squinted his faded old eyes toward a certain small table at a far end of the great dining-room.

"I see Joie's got the drop on me, and demmit! I bet she's a-fixin' another dose of that soothing syrup for me. Last night—just because I sneezed—she goes and fixes up a dose of stuff that Granny Wilson always gives the circus babies for colds and colic.

"Phil," he faced about and laid his short, big-jointed fingers on Philip's arm, "she's a-gettin' to be a woman, ain't she? Don't seem more'n yesterday that you'n me had to pick splinters out o' her pink little feet, and cut picture ladies out o' women's magazines. And now, all at once—she ain't little no more. Phil," he paused and blew his nose boisterously, "what d'you reckon the future's got for her?"

Philip Dorset looked off toward the horizon and shook his handsome head slowly.

"It's just as well that we can't see too far into the future, Jerimy. We ought to be satisfied with the present. Besides, Joan will go on being Joan. Impetuous, capricious, despotic and tender, loved and loving, joyous and—successful."

Yet despite his words Philip shivered unaccountably, and a vague, foreboding shadow fell across his heart.

CHAPTER II

TRIXIE SHOWS HER CLAWS

THE manager of the Farnum & Williams circus fingered his triple chin thoughtfully as he stared down at the thin, sullen-faced man who stood with pocketed hands before him. Then, tilting his shapeless panama farther back on his shining bald head, he thundered: "Say! Do you think this lot is a domestic court and that I'm the guy that fixes up fights between married people? Huh?"

The sullen-faced man hunched his two thin shoulders toward his two thin ears.

"I ain't asking you to do nothing but take me on as something else. You know I could handle props all right, or— or—" a flicker of pride suffused the hollow cheeks with dull red—"I could work with the stake or canvas men. I ain't ——"

The manager of The Greatest on Earth took a cigar from his pocket and ripping off the gaudy gilt band tossed it into the cinders at his feet.

"You ain't what?" He was devoting his attention to the lighting of the long black cigar.

"I ain't asking you to do more than give me a chance to stay with the F. & W." The other man lifted his sal-low face almost beseechingly.

"Let you stay! Say! Do you think I was born yesterday? Just because Trixie has canned you, has got tired of being your wife and perch-act partner, do you think I'm going to let you hang around until you get a chance to make a piece of damaged goods out of the man that's going to take your place in the perch act? When a man's been canned by a woman, he'll stand watching. Men like to do all the canning themselves, and when a skirt puts one over on a guy, he ain't a safe thing to have around. He's a walking bomb."

The eyes of the smaller man narrowed, but his lips trembled unmistakably.

"Maybe you're wiser than old Solomon was, but you don't know how much more dangerous a she-tiger is than an ordinary bomb." He bit his lips in his effort to steady them. "I ain't sore," he went on, "at the mut that's taking my place at balancing the perch-pole for her—not yet. He don't know what he's up against. I—I'm almost sorry for him. But there's another guy—a man she's daft over—a man she saves all her smiles for——"

"I ain't saying it's his fault. I guess it ain't, but if it wasn't for him——" a thin hand fell from his pocket in a weary gesture. He sighed. "I don't hold it against you, Lawson, that you won't keep me with the show. You're right. 'Twouldn't be safe."

Turning unsteadily, the young man slouched off toward the rope that was the north boundary of the lot, and the man left behind could not see that the haunted eyes fastened themselves on the small tent-office that stood at the end of the menagerie, nor that in them was a concentrated emotion which might be either pity or hate.

The manager of the Greatest on Earth took one step after the slouching, shambling figure; then controlling his momentary compassion, he swung heavily off toward the Big Top.

"A manager of a circus hasn't got any right to be sorry for anything or anybody," he soliloquized. "He's got to be on the managing job every minute, and he can't be a regular human like other folks." He puffed at his cigar diligently for a moment, then: "The only time I can't help being human is when Joie Kennerly's around, and she could pull humanness out of a pickled herring. I'll bet there's a certain elephant man that would have been less human than our worst bull if it hadn't been for her."

He lifted the canvas sidewall with his stout walking stick and stooping with difficulty, passed puffing and panting into the Big Top.

"I got a slant at Trixie and Joie having a sociable fight in front of Dorset's tent about an hour ago, and I shouldn't be a lot surprised if Bud is right. A she-tiger ain't much safer than a bomb. But at that, I'd put my last chip on Dorset's seeing to it that Joie's kept safe from — she-tigers. A man that can handle bulls ain't often scared of cats."

He stared thoughtfully at a row of blue seats. Then with a wheezy grunt the subject was dismissed, and the bald head wiped dry of perspiration.

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When Joan had finished her luncheon she wandered

mechanically over to the dressing-tent, and entering turned to the left down a corridor which followed an inside canvas wall. The end of the corridor opened into that half of the tent which formed the ladies' dressing-room, the side used by the men being separated from it by a canvas partition.

At the termination of this corridor stood a long table on which was piled a conglomerate mass of women's pageant or "spectacular" apparel — bright hued velvets, shimmering tinsel and spangles, feathered head-dresses, high red kid boots, harem veils, heavy paste jewelry, Turkish slippers and what not.

To those who served in the pageant the wardrobe mistress was giving out costumes according to number, and beside her sat Granny Wilson, only honorary member of the great F. & W., who from ballet girl at that time when, instead of the pageant, a ballet opened the performance, had become successively equestrienne, chariot driver, wardrobe mistress and moral sponsor—stiff-kneed, nervous, old and rheumatic. Knowing no other home (having been a part of the show since the old wagon days), she had indignantly refused to be pensioned, and had gravely accepted the post of moral sponsor which the F. & W. had as gravely manufactured for her.

Along the partition wall was an unbroken row of open trunks. Down the center were two more rows running parallel to each other with raised lids resting back to back. Down the outside wall was still another row whose lids, like those near the partition, leaned against the canvas. Sitting on camp stools in front of most of the trunks, or standing beside iron clothes trees, were women

in various stages of pageant dress, rouging, powdering, chattering, laughing and unexcitedly hurrying.

Glancing down the long aisles of trunks, Joan Kennerly's eyes met the scornfully laughing blue ones of Trixie Snyder, and instantly her fury of the morning returned. Blindly she made her way to her own trunk and sinking down upon her stool, eyed the contents of the trays rebelliously.

The top tray was divided in the middle and the halves raised and swung out on either side like shelves or brackets. Now as always they were strewn with an intricate maze of paint sticks, powder cans, cold cream jars, grease pots, tiny brushes, bits of lace and tinsel, odd pieces of jewelry, swansdown puffs, rabbits feet, paint-streaked towels, bottles, an orange, a book and a small pink satin ballet slipper.

Wrinkling her nose at the flushed face reflected in the mirror that was inside the trunk lid, Joan pushed her truant curls out of her gold-flecked eyes and sighed.

"Warm, dearie?" asked a dark-eyed woman who sat at her right.

"Terribly!" Joan made a brave effort to smile. "It must have been hard on the horses this morning. I wish they didn't have to go on in the spec this afternoon." She leaned over and dipped her pink-tipped fingers into a pail of water that stood near the end of her trunk.

"And how about us humans who don't happen to be stars?" Trixie Snyder, several trunks away, stared at Joan with frank hostility above a rouge stick. "Parades and specs! They're Hell! That's what they are! And just because you don't know what it means to sweat in

stuffy velvets under a blazing sun, you're being sorry for —*horses*. Huh!"

"Well—" Joan looked round at her challengingly, forked little flames shooting up in her lovely eyes—"I reckon even *Hell* can't hurt circus women— much!"

"Joie!" The dark-eyed woman at Joan's right laid a shocked hand on the rounded arm which Joan had just bared.

"Let her say it, Medea. As she has just said, even *Hell* can't hurt a circus girl!" The petite blond mopped at her neck with a damp towel.

"Take this, Trixie darling. You're ruining your make-up, dearie."

A little shrunken old lady who sat sewing before the perch-pole artist's trunk caught up a palm leaf fan, one of the kind sold by vendors in the Big Top, and held it out solicitously to the stormy girl at her side; and without a word or a grateful glance, the girl took it and began to fan herself vigorously, frowning at Joan across the fan's swaying top.

"And as for her gush about the horses," she went on vehemently, "she don't have to put on a stuffy gown and beat on a silly old piece of battered tin to help make a deafening din in honor of Cleopatra who lolls back on a glittering throne that's just a wagon underneath. She don't have to dress but the once, and that for her own particular stunt, and when she's through, she's through, and she can go down to the cars and have a nap, or curl up on the top of her trunk here. When the spec people are through with the spec, they have to get back to the dressing-rooms, put on more make-up where they've

sweat off the other, get out of one set of clothes and put on another, and begin all over again."

"Aren't you ashamed, Trixie Snyder! You know very well that no one with the show works harder than Joan. Why, you're still asleep when she's over in the Big Top practising the perch or the wire or the traps. I'd not be surprised if she could take my wire away from me any time she chose, or your perch-pole away from you. I heard Lawson say——"

"What're you trying to hand me, anyway? Where'd you get that line of talk? Take the perch away from me! Say, listen, Kiddo! I worked the perch before she knew what a perch was, and——"

"I've no doubt." The darker woman smiled a bit maliciously. "Joan isn't much more than a child, and you are—— But never mind, Trixie, it's too hot to argue."

There was biting sarcasm in the woman's tone, and the little old lady in the shabby cotton dress reared her gray head defiantly as she looked across her daughter's shoulder at the speaker.

Trixie's mother was not much given to defiance. Too long association with her wilful off-spring had made her timidly passive. It was only at such times as this, when something menaced the happiness of her girl, that a spark of spirit flickered back to life. And, unpopular as Trixie Snyder was, there were not many times when this little mother sensed a danger that called for her protest. Every one loved this small, bird-like mother as much as they disliked her daughter, and it was their regard for her which saved Trixie Snyder many frank and cutting

words. But Trixie, true to her kind, gave no credit to the source of her protection. It is doubtful even if, in her smug conceit, she recognized dangers which did not mature. To her the little, slaving mother, who sat during all the long hours of the day beside her trunk, mending and stitching the bits of her tinseled trappings, who never asked for more than a place in which to sleep, the three meals in the cook-house, and the humble privilege of slaving for this girl who "worked the perch" as she, the mother, had worked it before her, in those years when her knees were reliable and her body still supple, was merely a practical necessity; as had been Bud Snyder until she had tired of him, at that moment when their child had died.

Now, as the mother's faded old eyes met those of the woman at Joan's right, the look of defiance melted and disappeared, and in its place came one of appeal. That was all. That was the very best she could do. Trixie brooked no interference in her affairs, even when a word from those withered old lips might defend her successfully. So the mute pleading in the dim brown eyes was the mother's most formidable weapon, and even that had to be used with cautious care lest Trixie's suspicious glance intercept it; and woe to the little mother if caught asserting herself beyond the rights of her tireless needle.

Medea Tabet nodded ever so slightly; then, taking up a huge swansdown puff, leaned nearer to Joan and began carefully to powder the girl's bare shoulders where a thin silk kimona had fallen away from them.

"Wearing your pink net to-day, Joie?" she asked by way of changing the subject.

"Can't. I tore it yesterday in my rush toward the pad-room."

"Hurrying to get out to Philip Dorset, weren't you, dearie? I can't understand why you make him wait for you always in the padroom." Trixie smiled acidulously.

"No?" Joan's answering smile was enigmatical, and the blond girl winced. Joan could be a small volcano at times.

"Of course, he's a head and you're a star, but——"

"But?" prompted Joan as she powdered her dainty bare feet with talcum.

"Well, er—you set a bad example for the rest of the show. Any other man and girl caught visiting together so frequently on the lot would be fined; and yet Lawson allows you to—to spend most of your time with Dorset. Dorset's a handsome man and all that, but I can't see why you're so crazy over him. Besides, nobody knows anything about him. Men so silent about themselves usually have good reasons for their silence. Refugees——"

"Stop it!" Joan lifted her head in quick passion. Then with odd, sudden calm, she drew on her long yellow silk stockings and thrust her feet into tiny yellow satin ballet slippers.

Very calmly she took from the steel rack beside her a creation in yellow chiffon, and flinging it over her head dropped it deftly into place as the kimona slid down to her feet. Still with that calm which precedes a storm, she shook the gauzy clouds of it until they fell like a faint yellow fog round her slim, boyish figure; then, fastening a yellow ribbon to her plait of bronze hair, she ran her satin-shod feet into their cinder protectors or sabots—two stained wooden shoes.

Round the dressing-room had swept the electric current of a brewing storm. They felt the ominous warning, those who sat at their trunks, and the din of chatter had dribbled away to a mere patter, and at last to an occasional word. Some one called from the far end:

"Trixie, she mak jealous—yes? She theenk, maybe, Pheelip he no can like her. So?"

"You've said it, Zetta. Dorset's turned her down again, and she's got to take it out on somebody," another added.

"Can't you get used to it, Trixie?"

Trixie glowered at them silently, but at that moment she made a fierce vow to lay in the dust this little upstart of a Joan Kennerly, who filled the position which *she* should have filled both in the circus and in Philip Dorset's heart.

"Joie, there's the call for the pageant!" Medea Tabet touched Joan's arm anxiously. "And here you are already dressed for your act. Sit down, dear; you've loads of time."

But Joan was oblivious to the touch. She was standing beside her littered trunk looking down the long dressing-room, her vivid lips parted, her delicately penciled brows lifted in a startled fashion, a quick hammering of the pulse at the base of her slender throat.

Her heart was beating frightfully. Her hands were cold. Her eyes burned and her throat ached. Something seemed to have died within her, and some strange, new, wonderful thing had risen up in its place.

"Bah!" Trixie flounced past on her way to the Big Top, "Dorset is nothing to me. And no *circus girl* is

anything to *him*. He's like the rest of his rotten world—ready to be entertained by us, but by no means ready to take us into his home. Though our little Joie here seems to be of another opinion."

Joan looked after her disdainfully. Then:

"I don't know how many of you heard what she just said to me," she began in her clear young voice, "but for the benefit of those who did hear and who are patiently waiting for me to tear up her trunk, I want to explain that I feel suddenly too grown up to—to do it. I reckon being in the circus can't keep a girl from growing into a lady, even—if—if there are some who never get to be anything else than—just *females*."

Her words beat crisply against the dull silence like scuttering hailstones against a rain-sodden earth. Women on their way to the padroom paused and looked back at the slim figure in the gauzy cloud of yellow.

"You are ver' grand, Mees Joie! When my lions zay mak mad to-day, I say: 'Why you keen act like *cats*? Why you no calm lek Mees Joie, eh?'" Zetta clapped her hands delightedly, her dark Spanish eyes turned worshipfully toward the small F. & W. star. "An' they theenk——"

But the pageant call sounded again insistently, peremptorily, and the little lion tamer together with the rest of the ladies ran flutteringly from the tent.

CHAPTER III

JOAN RIDES TO WOMANHOOD

WHEN at last Joan stood in the padroom—the paddock at the rear of the wide back doors that led into the Big Top—awaiting the call for the number in which was her act, she stared about her at the queer, fantastic figures gathered there under the wide canopy, and felt the strangeness of it all for the first time in her life. She had ridden on the shoulders of some of those clowns when she was a baby. She had clung to the index finger of the woman tumbler who was coming from the arena, and had toddled beside her when she was learning to walk. That man in the green silk tights, who had just blown her a kiss, was the very man who had taught her to say “bye-bye.”

All about her was the life she had always known, yet of a sudden it seemed new and strange. For the first time she saw the paint instead of the dear familiar faces beneath it. She glanced down at her own slim figure with its slender limbs and its high, flat, boyish breast. She was wearing yellow to-day, and the gauzy folds of chiffons fell about her like a filtered sunbeam.

She had known so much of spangles and gauze, and now she was wondering a little, as she touched the soft cloud that enveloped her, just what gingham and linen

would feel like when worn in a box of a house that had red geraniums in all its windows and a wee garden beyond the back door.

All about her, like magicians of Arabian Nights, were performers awaiting their numbers. Women in fluffy ballet skirts, or long-trained gowns; men in tights or red riding-jackets and satin knee-breeches; to Joan, looking at them all, they seemed unaccountably strange and unfamiliar. It was just as if she had never seen them before. Had they all changed? Had the entire world changed? Or had only *she* changed? What had happened to make her so remote, so far removed from all that had gone to the making up of her short young life?

Poor, troubled little Joan wondering there in the shadows! Love brings its own perspective, and sometimes it dares even to change the topography of life, and to switch the sign-posts which long have been the guiding landmarks of one's soul.

Joan had loved Philip Dorset from that first moment when he had come to her as "the new elerphunt man," but never until to-day, when Trixie, in her harangue against the world, had placed Philip outside the ropes, saying that Philip Dorset would never marry a circus girl—to-day, when she had come suddenly to understand the exact quality of Trixie's feeling for him—had she loved Philip any differently than she loved her Uncle Jerimy. To-day Joan had crossed her Rubicon, passed over the line which separates adolescence from womanhood; and never again would Joan love Philip in quite the same way.

For another long interval Joan stood there alone in the

shadows; then some one touched her lightly on the arm.

"Feeling better, Joie?" It was Philip Dorset. He was smiling down at her as he patted the arched neck of her horse which a groom had just led into the padroom.

"No. Worse, Philip! Much worse! I feel like the cinnamon bear must have felt that time some one fed him tobacco when he thought he was getting a carrot."

"That's bad!" Philip laughed. "I, too, feel—" he stopped and brushed a bit of sawdust from the cobwebby chiffon that was fluttering against his knee—"that I've missed my carrots."

Joan looked at him wonderingly. She felt that he was talking beyond her, and again that vague, intangible something seemed to be rising up between them. A chill as from the icy breath of an approaching evil swept over her. She caught at his arm with cold little fingers.

"Philip, are you wanting something that you can't get? Aren't you happy, Philip?" An odd look in Joan's face startled him. Mutely he stared back when she began again: "Is it—is it something about—about *somebody*?"

"No." He shook his head, forcing a wan smile. "It's just the carrots. You see the bear gets his carrots when he does his tricks according to the rules of his master. But my master seems to have forgotten me." He did not catch the puzzled frown that was gathering on Joan's smooth brow, and half to himself he went on: "Carrots for stunts, rewards for virtues! The lash of the whip for defiance of the master or the failure to observe a too rigid convention. Primal instincts subjugated! A world of law and order and duty-bound puppets. If only I had known——"

But the blare of the band as it swung off into an abrupt change was the signal for the next number, and gathering her chiffons about her, Joan Kennerly, star of the Greatest on Earth, went from the padroom and her elephant man into the sawdust-scented Big Top.

She followed her prancing horse and his red-jacketed groom through the sawdust and tan-bark of the wide hippodrome and over the wooden ring-bank into the center ring, a fine line gathering on her smooth brow in her effort to piece out that part of Philip's sentence which had been lost to her in the blare of the band.

"It's been worse than a Chinese puzzle, to-day has!" She nodded her head perplexedly at the blue ring-bank, as she kicked off the stained wooden shoes. "And I've been trying all day to make things fit together, but they've been nothing but square plugs and—and *round holes*. Everything's been upside down, and now Philip's gone and got upside down, too."

"Ted"—she poked a tapering finger-tip in the flank of her restless mount as the groom led him past—"if you get upside down and spill me off—I—I'll never speak to you again!"

A sharp whistle cut through the music of the band. Ted's groom stepped back into the center of the ring, and Ted, neck arched, ears straight and pointed, swung off round the ring in an easy, rhythmical canter.

Joan stood back against the ring-bank until Ted had twice circled the ring; then, when he was directly opposite her for the third time, with the full width of the ring space between them, she flew like a shaft of yellow, straight across that space, and with a leap into the air

planted her small feet firmly on his shining, rosined back.

For one brief moment she gazed out over the sea of humanity which rippled in rows and tiers around the hippodrome from the ground to the very top of the high canvas sidewall, and a wistful questioning clouded the dark-fringed eyes. Then as Ted went cantering round with her, her gaze swept the other two rings and the stages, and out of her eyes went the questioning and into them came affection and a fierce loyalty.

She smiled tenderly at the pretty lady in the military suit of white and gold who sat in a high white cart and drove a waltzing horse in the end ring at the right, at the Henderson family doing its tumbling act on one of the stage platforms, at dear old Longshanks waiting in the padroom for the number in which he would do his splendid aërial work high up above the audience, at the clowns driving their balking "jitney" round the hippodrome; and a flood of love warmed her chilled young heart.

Then her wandering gaze clashed into that of the equestrian director, the pompous little man in irreproachable evening clothes who stood importantly erect, half way across the hippodrome between the center ring and the bandstand, the signal whistle held gracefully ready for service, between thumb and forefinger, his dark, closely cropped mustache drawn away from his white teeth in a smile.

At once the emotions that had buffeted her about all day joined forces, mobilized themselves into a warring battalion that leveled its guns at the grandiloquent little man beneath the shiny silk hat.

Blake had a habit of smiling at Joan, and Joan could have slain him for it. Everybody smiled at Joan, because smiling at Joan seemed such a natural thing to do. But only Blake's smile irritated her, though she had never known quite why.

Now, however, as her wandering gaze clashed into Blake's cool, steady one, a feeling of revulsion rushed over her, and with it came sudden knowledge of what it was that had always so irritated her. He was staring through the clothes and flesh of her to the girl heart of her; straight through the sockets where were her eyes into the skull of her. Sidney Blake's gaze denuded her, stripped her down to her bare soul, and left her—the body, brain and heart of her—naked, unclothed!

She felt at that moment that for years he must have known every thought and impulse as they had come to her, even before she herself had known them. She felt, too, that he must have known the different periods at which she had outgrown the silken under-garments that formed the foundation for these gauzy chiffon draperies.

She saw that his gaze was riveted to her bare throat and breast, and a flood of warm blood crimsoned her small, piquant face. A sense of shame, an unfamiliar sex-consciousness filled all her being; and how was she to know, this half-matured woman, that her strange new love for Philip had thus sensitized her awakening sex-instincts, making her subconsciously alive to any menace that approached her immaculate virginity? How was she to know that love had set up its guard posts and put sentinels on duty?

Her bronze eyes flashed little flames of scorn at the

slight, pompous man below her. The man, gazing up at her, thought he had never seen anything so ravishingly lovely; but as he looked the girl tossed her small head angrily, and with a little whistle to her horse flung herself into a veritable whirlwind of a dance.

Round and round she pirouetted on her satin-shod toes, until she looked like a half-blown rose with yellow petals fluttering in the breeze. Poising on the very tip of one slim foot, she would hide the other in a swirl of chiffons high above her small head. Jumping to the ground below and running a few steps beside the horse, she would leap into the air suddenly and come down again to the sawdust on the other side without having touched the animal's glossy back.

Ted was going at his best speed now. His glistening black body slanting in toward the center of the ring at an amazing angle, his head low, his neck arched, his back tingling where the dainty feet pattered against it, his heart wondering at the lack of spontaneity in the dancer. Something was wrong with the little mistress. The joyous effervescence that always had been hers had gone from her.

There had been many moods since first she had taken him with her into the Big Top, but never this listless, indifferent one. There had been times when havoc had followed in her stormy wake, when make-up boxes, laces, powder-puffs and ribbons lay like spent shrapnel behind her. But at those times Joan had come into the center ring like a rollicking elf. Her eyes had glowed wickedly and she had danced like a thing possessed.

There had been moods when Joan had come forth

in the sackcloth and ashes of a religion. Sometimes it was the religion of Christ as taught her by Granny Wilson, sometimes Confucianism or Buddhism as she had learned it from the Chinese jugglers, and sometimes Mohammedanism as she had absorbed it from the Arabs who worked with the elephants. At these times she had danced like a saint before a sacrificial altar, with the winged lightness of an angel.

Then there were those times when she had bubbled with fun and the pure joy of living, and her twinkling feet had performed daring new stunts that had made the audiences forget the other rings and stages. Very distinctly Ted remembered the sad Joans, the tender, misty-eyed Joans, at those times when some member of the circus had been carried from the Big Top with spangles drooping and limbs stiffening. But never had there been a mood like this, never this mechanical Joan, this strangely pensive Joan.

Again came a sharp, shrill whistle. It called for the exit of all acts save that in the center ring, and instantly the audience as one being turned its face toward "the gr-r-reatest bareback rider in the wor-r-rld, ladies and gentlemen! The little lady who will now honor you with features never before attempted by any living human being. Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Joan Kennerly!"

The band swung into a Hungarian fantasia, Ted measured his swift gait to suit it, and the yellow butterfly of a girl atop his back whirled into a mad gipsy dance, her slender body swaying rhythmically with the motion of the horse, her face flushed beneath its riot of shimmering curls; laughing, running, vaulting, somersaulting, jump-

ing through paper hoops held up at the edge of the ring by the groom, and dancing as only Joan Kennerly, star of the Greatest on Earth, could dance. And through the sea of humanity around the Big Top there ran a thrill of delighted awe.

"Where's Philip?" she asked a moment later, as she came up to Jerimy Kennerly in the padroom, a storm of applause following her through the wide back doors.

Jerimy looked down with some misgiving at the small finger and thumb that had begun to twist a button which hung none too securely to the pleat of his shirt.

"Reckon he's gone round to the bulls. 'Pears like as if he's gettin' restless." Then: "Better go down to the cars and have a nap before supper, honey." He pinched the rounded cheek nearest him. But Joan did not answer. She squeezed his hand, patted Ted's neck as the groom led him past, then turning toward Zetta's lion wagon at her right, insinuated herself into its sheltering shadow.

Philip would come! Always he had been here. And in a moment he would come. She would see him as he swung round the big "engine wagon" that made the acetylene gas, and when he had found her, he would tell her that Venus was sick or Albert had had too much sweet stuff tossed into his greedy trunk, and that he had had to stay in the menagerie, but that he was sorry. And she'd lean her cheek against his arm— she liked the feel of his rough tweed coats against her skin— and tell him— *something*, she didn't quite know what.

For a long time Joan stood there waiting; then a loud blare of drums burst sharply through the wide doors and an expectant hush fell upon the groups waiting in the

padroom. A clown came running out of the Big Top and, laughing raucously, galloped down the aisle that was instantly formed by the artists of the next number. A man followed, leading two beautiful collie dogs. A troupe of Chinese jugglers and artists of legerdemain pressed close upon the heels of the restless dogs. Then came more clowns; and after them a tank-cage of trained seals.

One of the clowns, taking a hasty inventory of the padroom, ferreted out the slim figure shrinking into the depths of the shadows. His chalked lids opened wide, and, raising one hand, he shielded his eyes mockingly.

"Take it from me, folks, there's something wrong with our little Joan of Arc. She ain't seeking the shadows for nothing. She's the little angel miss who put miss in mischief, and she's been up to some trick to-night or she'd be out here in the light, making us step lively. Our little Calamity hasn't left the center of the stage for nothing. take it from me!"

The waiting groups glanced into the shadows in surprise. Joan edged nearer the light and made faces at them. They laughed indulgently. She picked up a cinder from the ground and threw it with the dexterity of a boy, straight at the grinning face of the teasing clown. The clown dodged it gracefully and, sticking his thumbs into his ears, wiggled his fingers at her tauntingly.

"He's just a nut; don't worry about him, Joie dear," remarked a man in a white satin suit soothingly. "He's afraid to go out in the woods alone. The squirrels would get him. He never learned to be a clown. He was born that way. He can't help it."

"And your friend ain't nothing but a kinker, Joie. He

learned to ride a rosinback when he lived out west and was trying to get away from a crowd of cow punchers with a long rope," called back the clown as he trotted off to the dressing-room.

Everybody laughed—that is, everybody except Joan. Joan, whose laughter had always been just behind the vivid lips, wanted suddenly to cry. She felt neglected and forlorn. She hadn't any mother or father— or— or sisters or brothers and— and the least that Philip Dorset could do was to be here in the padroom when she came off. He always *had* been. Why then, to-night, when she wanted somebody to be good to her more than she had ever wanted it in her life, was he not here?

Another ear-splitting blare from the band inside the Big Top sounded the cue for the next number. A sharp whistle followed. There came a whoop from a new set of clowns and a general dash for the wide rear doors.

Joan, left alone, stiffened her traitorously trembling lips and went slowly back to the dressing-room, where she changed her chiffons for a linen skirt and a middy blouse. Then, tying under her dimpled chin the wide blue ribbons of a floppy straw hat, she blew a mechanical little kiss to Medea Tabet, ran down the aisle to the corridor, pinched Granny Wilson's ear as she passed, and with a forced, throaty giggle was gone.

A moment later Ted and his mistress hurdled the ropes of the lot, and went cantering away down the dusty road that hugged the bank of the river.

Great, languid willow trees drooped thirstily toward the water, their green leaves rattling in the light, puffy breeze. The sun was sinking toward the crest of the

hills beyond the stream. The ripples glistening on the river's breast were like the scales on a fish. A great peace seemed to envelop all the world, and Joan, sighing under the comforting sense of it, reached out a small tanned hand and patted Ted's arched neck tenderly.

A cloud of white dust rose up behind them. The little curls of red-gold hair no longer clung with damp tenacity to the smooth brow, but blew back under the brim of the wide hat which had tilted far over one pink ear, and now hung like a broken wing flapping in the wind created by Ted and the puffy breeze.

After a time they left the road and turned off into a narrow lane which carried one, neither knew whither. It wormed its uncertain way between two meadows, like a bridge spanning a billowing sea. The grain moved restlessly in great, mottled waves, and Joan, looking out over the sea of it, wondered vaguely what this new thing was that had come upon her. Yesterday had retreated—gone a million miles from her—and to-day! Somewhere inside she hurt, but through the hurt came something warm and glowing, like a bright light.

She was a— what was it Trixie had said?— a— hybrid. Webster hadn't been very clear about the word, but he had seemed to think it meant a kind of mongrel. Mongrel! That's what dogs were when they were what Longshanks called "mutts." But——

She and Philip wouldn't care when they—when they were married. (And the light blazing up almost burned the hurt). Philip *wasn't* like the rest of the world about circus girls. And anyway the rest of the world *wasn't* that—*that way*, either. Philip had told her it

wasn't. Then what was it that was hurting down inside her? She didn't know, and trying to think it all out made her head ache, and whenever she thought of Philip she stopped hurting—almost—but her heart beat against her throat and her hands went cold.

"And—I've never—*never* before felt like that about my elephunt man!" Her brows contracted thoughtfully, and for an interval she stared at the sea of waving grain concentratedly. Then suddenly:

"Let's run, Ted. Let's run like— like anything!"

For a mile they ran down the dusty lane that lay between the meadows, then they galloped over a low hill and came again upon the river which had wound round the hill to meet them.

Voluntarily Ted slackened his speed, approaching the bank of the half dry river bed, moving slower and yet slower of his own volition, until he had reached the great, drooping willows; then unguided he stepped into the wide shadow of one and stopped.

The river was but a narrow satiny ribbon at this point. On either side a third of the river bed lay dry as baked clay in the late afternoon sun. There were streaks of dust-covered gravel and sand, streaks of mud where tiny rivulets had but recently cut through before they, too, had dried up in the heat of midsummer, streaks of curling scales where mud in the process of drying had cracked like shale and curled toward the sun, streaks of mussel shells left by the drought to bleach like bones on a desert.

A white cloud hung lazily above all that was left of the river. A buzzard circled drowsily between cloud and glistening stream. Not a leaf of the willow trees flut-

tered. The breeze had gone on its way, leaving behind it a dead stillness.

The girl on the horse leaned forward and for an instant she pressed her cheek tenderly against a handful of the animal's black mane.

"Good old Ted!"

A faint smile hovered round the sweet red mouth. Again strange fires were burning up her hurt. Abstractedly she watched the maneuvers of a velvety black bumble bee as he gathered honey from the heart of a sunflower which reared its huge yellow head high above the rail fence on the opposite side of the road.

"I wonder," she mused, "if Trixie is very hurt." She fingered Ted's reins thoughtfully. "I'm sorry I was mean. I'll give her my ducky new parasol to-night—. But if"—her small chin lifted aggressively—"if she's not *hurt*," she amended, "if she's just plain mad, then I'll not give her anything. Maybe I'll take something away from her."

Then for a long time she looked silently out over the shimmering remnant of what had been last winter's turbulent river. One hand shaded her eyes Indian fashion, the other rested idly on the pommel of the brown cross saddle. The vivid lips were parted, and the small teeth shone like the shells that lay bleaching in the sun. Finally her gaze wandered round to a square of billboard that sprang up from the weeds on the opposite bank, and there it riveted.

Squinting her eyes and puckering her forehead, she made a determined effort to decipher the ultra-marine letters that told flamboyantly against a background of

yellow of something that she ought to have, ought to take, or ought to do. Not that she did not recognize the poster by its unmistakable color. But she said to herself: "If I can read the words on that F. & W. poster, I'll tell Philip to-night after the show. If I can't read them—I'll wait and let *him* tell *me*."

Joan had a habit of making wagers with herself. She compelled all sorts of incidents and feats to decide things for her, and honest little gambler that she was, she never evaded the issue. The decision thus attained was rigidly adhered to.

"F-A-R-N-U-M A-N-D WILLIAMS C-I-R-CUS! G-R-E-A-T-E-S-T S-H-O-W ON EARTH. JOAN KENNERLY WORLD'S GREATEST EQUESTRIENNE."

Slowly she read it all, now and then spelling out a word that seemed to blur, and very careful to be sure that she really saw and not just imagined each letter.

"Ted, we can tell him to-night that—that we'll marry him." She clapped her hands against her horse's neck.

Ted snorted. Below the stirrups the froth-flecked skin quivered.

Of a sudden the clasped hands relaxed.

What if Philip loved some one else! Or what if her Uncle Jeremy should say no, when Philip asked him! But neither of those things could be! Still——

If—if only she had a mother. Funny she'd not missed one so very much until now. Maybe that was because things had never happened to her quite so fast as now. Anyway, mothers were wonderful and—and somehow they always *fixed things*.

She slid from the saddle to the ground and pushing the floppy hat off her head, so that it hung down her back by its ribbon ties, she leaned her bronze head against her horse's sleek shoulder.

Two very beautiful golden-brown eyes stared at the tight bark of a willow tree, and two very red lips trembled wilfully, despite their brave effort to keep still.

A gopher peered at her from behind the tree and, blinking his bright little eyes, seemed to recognize an affinity in this slender bronze statue, for he scampered boldly round the tree and into his hole that was not a yard from her feet.

A black snake slid through the burned grass beyond the tree, the crackling blades making a faint sound as they rattled over him.

The soaring buzzard disappeared in a timberland up stream. The river glistened less dazzlingly. The bleaching shells shone less glaringly white. The grayish scales of dried mud curled into purplish shadows. The billboard on the farthest bank became but a pale spot on the landscape. The ultra-marine letters stretched waveringly across it like meaningless smudges of black.

The shadow of the willow tree grew very narrow and long, and then, like the intangible thing that it was, faded off into nothingness.

The lane, winding close to the river, became cool and inviting, and the white dust looked silvery gray.

The sunflower drooped its great, tired head toward the rude rail fence across the road. The velvety black bumble bee had flown away to his secret storehouse. Over the billowing field that lay just beyond the rail fence,

great purple splotches widened and spread until all the world seemed to have gone suddenly purple and dark.

The girl moved her head and looked dreamily down at the narrow stream that had grown mysterious and black, came back to Ted with a little start, patted his nose affectionately, and with one of her quick, unexpected movements sprang into the saddle. Ted without further invitation swung about as if on a pivot, and one bound put him back in the lane.

He flew along between the meadows at a speed that made the wind sing in the small ears of his young mistress, head bowed, neck arched, trained feet flying. And in the saddle, like a boy half grown to manhood, sat Joan, emotions once more at war within her. The wind swept tears from the long dark lashes, and impish smiles chased each other round the red lips that sang shrilly an improvised song.

Clouds of dust hovered over the lane in the dark that lay behind them. Ted, conscious of the vigorous currying and rubbing that would be necessary to make him presentable for the evening show, conscious, too, that his mistress was liable to a fine if it was discovered that she had saddled him and ridden him off the lot, slackened his pace not in the least, though he dreaded to face his groom, and hoped that Lawson might not hear of the hour's adventure. Supper lay at the end of the run, and a little more lather and a little more dust would not matter in the scrubbing which was already due him.

Joan, crouching low against his neck, imagined that she was a real star, and that she had just fallen upon a strange planet whose people gathered about her in critical

curiosity and pointed wonderingly at her spangles and paint.

Within a stone's throw of the lot, Ted stopped short and reared his front legs into the air. A man's hand was at his head, and a figure had been lifted clear of the ground.

"Damned little beast!" panted a husky voice. "Don't you know me, Ted, old scout?"

"Bud Snyder!" Joan peered down at the dusk-shadowed face as Ted came suddenly back to his usual calm.

"That's the ticket! Bud Snyder, late of the F. & W.!" There was a grating laugh as the hand fell away from Ted's head. "Heard you singing coming up the road, and I recognized old Ted's gait. I been kind of wanting to see you, Miss Joie. You're still growing, ain't you?"

"But—you—I thought you went back east when Trixie——"

"Canned me? No. I didn't. Just faked. The old F. & W. can't shake me, Miss Joie. I'm as much a part of it as them tents over there, and I— I'm Trixie's husband. Ain't nothing can change me, and they ain't no way I can be got rid of as long as I can ride a break-beam or beg and walk!"

"Bud!"

"Don't get scared, little lady. I was scared myself for a few days. Thought I might run amuck. But I guess even running amuck takes sand and— and that's what I ain't got." His head drooped between his two thin shoulders. "A woman can take the sand that's in a man,"—he looked up with a quick jerk of his head—"and make it into cement— concrete— make him solid and fine, or—

or she can toss his sand to the winds and— leave him empty— a shell, with nothing to build on. And— when a man becomes— just so much *bone and flesh* he— he's not much good at anything except— panhandling."

"Panhandling! Bud!"

"Sure. Why not? Who cares?"

"But you're strong, Bud. You— you could work."

"Strong? Look at that!" He held up an arm and pushed back the sleeve from an emaciated wrist. "Isn't much like the muscled thing it used to be, is it? Been days—lots of days—without anything to eat. It took a spell before I could get up the nerve even to panhandle, to beg for a bite, and I had to keep riding under cars to keep close to the show. Oh, I'm a has-been, Miss Joie. There ain't enough man left in me to run amuck. If there was I'd get a gun and finish the job *she* started."

"You wouldn't run amuck, Bud. You're not that kind."

Joan's heart ached with pity.

"Ain't I? It's real nice of you to say it, but— well, you can't ever tell much about a guy when he gets to— to *taking* things to make him *forget*. But I guess——"

"Bud——" Joan leaned over and laid a hand on his arm. She was wondering vaguely just what he meant by "*taking* things." "Maybe Trixie'll take you back. Maybe she'll——"

"Small chance. I'm a lunger— a has-been and— I— I couldn't balance a toothpick. Ever since I busted that little blood pipe in here,"—he rapped a thin hand against his breast—"I been going to the dogs. She knew it, and when I talked about taking the pill-slinger's advice and laying off for a few weeks, she threw a fit, and called

me a fool. She didn't know, though," he defended loyally, "that it was so bad. Why, the last night I balanced her perch for her, I almost doubled under it."

"Oh, Bud! And she let you!"

"But she didn't know, I tell you. She— Trixie always liked *strength*. That was what she first liked about me. And now— well, I could do something else and— maybe— maybe she'd not guess."

"You mean with the F. & W.?"

"Yes." The man lifted a haggard face to Joan's. "I thought you might"—he paused and his eyes lowered—"might speak to Lawson. I asked him to-day, and when he turned me down, I was almost glad. But now——

"I'm not proud— not any more, Miss Joie. And there's so many jobs besides balancing perches. And maybe if you—could just—natural-like speak to—to Trixie"—wistfully—"she'd take me— back."

"I'll see Lawson to-morrow, Bud, and he'll put you at something, I know he will. And Trixie'll listen when I tell her——"

"That I want— just to— come back. Maybe—" There was a momentary silence, then suddenly, with long fingers clutching at her skirt: "But don't tell her about— *this*, please." Again he rapped his narrow breast.

"I shan't, Bud." Joan blinked her eyes rapidly, and ran the back of one hand childishly across them.

"Thanks! Thanks, Miss Joie." The fingers fell from her skirt and Bud Snyder became one with the gloom of trees at the left of the road.

CHAPTER IV

THE BUNDLE AT WESTMINSTER BRIDGE

A COOL night breeze swept across the little Iowa town and along the narrow road to the circus lot where it tugged vainly at the guyed-down tent tops of The Greatest Show on Earth. Behind the main dressing-tent, near the edge of the lot where a taut rope forbade the curious to enter, a man and a girl stood looking back at the kaleidoscopic lot that to-morrow would be barren and uninteresting. To-night, in the half darkness, it pulsed with life. Between the lights of the lot and the two behind the dressing-rooms, shadowy figures moved to and fro. A band played, gaily, incessantly. Acetylene lights flickered and flared here and there. The white tent tops glowed like gigantic fireflies from the blaze of lights beneath.

Silent men ran swiftly across the path of light which lay between the dressing-rooms and padroom. Wagons creaked mysteriously in the shadows beyond. Out front the side shows were but heaps of prosaic canvas. No longer did the wonders that were to be seen within picture themselves luridly on great painted banners. It was the beginning of the end, the first move toward migration. To-morrow the lot would be bare as the palm of your hand of all except a great ring of sawdust surrounded by

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a circle of empty soda bottles, paper bags, peanut shells and abandoned fans which had found their way through the apertures between the high tiers of seats in the Big Top, paths of cinders, a broken stake or two, hay beds that had been flattened by the bodies of heavy animals, a few decrepit camp stools, some battered make-up boxes and several cold cream cans whose contents had been depleted.

To-morrow it would be only the ashes of what had been. It would resemble the scarred and abandoned camping-ground of an army.

"Pulling up stakes" might have saddened those inexperienced in the ways of a circus, but to the man and the girl behind the dressing-rooms it was simply the usual thing; no more, no less. It was merely the going on to the next town on their route, where another city of canvas would spring into existence almost before this one had entirely disappeared.

The girl pushed back the flapping collar of her middy blouse and looking back at the animated lot, sighed audibly. Again there had been no Philip awaiting her in the padroom, and she was sorely troubled. Once, during her act, she thought she had caught a glimpse of him looking in at her, but when she could glance again toward the padroom no Philip was there, and she had gone stumbling back to the dressing-room forlorn and dejected.

"You ain't well, honey!" The man laid a roughened hand on the girl's bare head. "You never et enough dinner to-night to keep alive the trained flea out there in the side show. You been practising on them demmed traps every mornin' soon as the riggin' is up. Ain't you satis-

fied to be a kinker 'thout a-wantin' to be a trap worker? When I saw you was sick to-day, I says to myself, says I: 'J. Kennerly, you ain't got the sense you was borned with. Why in blazes are you a-lettin' your little Joan work them traps on days when it's hot enough to make the devil think we're competin' with him?' And I says, says I: 'I won't have it!'

The man leaned toward her.

"Do you hear me, Joie? Demmed if I'll have you a-practisin' like that!"

A soft little hand crept up to the seamed face and patted a stubbled cheek caressingly, while a pair of warm lips whispered against the lavender shirt-front:

"Don't scold, Jerryman. Just put your arms around me and hug tight—*tight as ever you can!* And kiss my hair, Uncle Jerry, like you always do when I hurt somewhere."

Jerimy Kennerly's old heart thumped violently into his fat-padded ribs.

"Be you a-hurtin', Joie? Is it your ankle again?" he asked a little hoarsely as he folded her close in his short, powerful arms. "Is it?"

"No. It—it isn't my ankle. It—*isn't exactly anything.* I'm just punched in at the stomach, Uncle Jerry, and——"

"You're what?" In sudden panic he held her off at arm's length and stared at her with beetling eyes. "I might 'a knowed them demmed traps——"

"It wasn't the traps either, Uncle Jerry. I've just felt sort of hollow and empty-like all day. Not hungry for food, you understand, Uncle Jerry. Not that a bit. But

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just the same kind of feeling I had the time I was up on the end of a perch-pole that Bud Snyder was balancing for me, and I wanted to get down. Remember how scared I was? And remember how Bud kept yelling for you? And how he nearly let me fall when his poor legs got so tired?"

"And Phil and me got a net?" Jerimy chuckled. "And just as you slid down, old Lawson come in and said he reckoned how's that Kennerly kid would be the ruination of the F. & W. before she'd growed a inch higher. Remember! Huh! I calc'late you've done some few things I ain't liable to forget."

"Well," went on Joan, snuggling once more into the muscular old arms, "I felt all punched in at the stomach when I was up on the end of that perch-pole, and my hands were cold, and— and I was kind of choked. And"—she picked at the worn faded tie which was awry beneath Jerimy's rugged chin—"I've felt that same way to-day. I— I guess, Uncle Jerry, I've been lonesome for— *her*."

"It's them demmed traps! I knowed it! I ain't goin' to have you do nothin' but ride your Ted from now on, young lady. Hear me?"

The girl slid a finger under an elastic strap of his braces and, pulling it out and away from the lavender shirt, let it go suddenly free.

"But it wasn't the traps, Uncle Jerry. Honest truly it wasn't. I— I'm just— wanting— her, I reckon, more than I ever did want her. I wonder—" her voice trailed off into a whisper.

The man bent his shaggy old head in an attempt to

peer into the small shadowed face that was turned from him. He grunted encouragement.

"I wonder," repeated Joan, "if— if you'd tell me the story again to-night— the story about— London and— *me*. You don't have to get over to the horses till the next number comes off and— and I— kind of— want to— to hear it to-night, Uncle Jerry."

Jerimy Kennerly glanced back over his shoulder toward the Big Top. Through the padroom there showed a square of the interior, framed by the wide back doors, and a kaleidoscope of color slid back and forth across it like odd bits of brilliant glass in a child's puzzle box.

It seemed such a little while ago since that never-to-be-forgotten night in London. Yet he had crammed all his fifty-eight years into the brief period which had spanned between then and now. He fumbled in his pocket and bringing forth a homely old pipe, rapped it sharply against the line-stake in front of him.

Joan turned her head expectantly, and Jerimy, through eyes that were half closed above the pipe and the cupped hand which shielded it from the wind, saw a new and unfamiliar questioning on the lovely face lifted to his. Then, as the light from the match flickered up in a last flare and went out, leaving the lifted face but faintly distinct in the pale moonlight, Jerimy swore savagely under his breath.

"It was just such a night as this," he began, mopping his broad brow with a huge cotton handkerchief.

"Yes, I know," nodded Joan as she folded her two arms behind her bronze head and turned her face to the stars. "I know. Only the wind blew a little stronger."

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"Twan't blowin' much harder." Jerimy moistened a palm, sailor fashion, and held it up, as though settling this point about the wind was the most important thing in the world at that moment. Then:

"And I had been nosin' round the scrap of public garden opposite Cleo's needle. Along comes a bobby and tells them as doesn't know it that the clock what has just struck nine is the vamoose signal. I steps out o' that park, watches the bobby lock the gates and then I meanders acrost the street. I wa'n't in no partic'lar hurry about gettin' back to my chambers. It was hot everywhere, but it was hotter in my room than in all the other places. So I just strolls over to Westminster Bridge and drapes myself over the coping, so as I could give the river the once over."

"And it was dark, but you could see lights in the warehouses on the other side," added Joan in breathless interest.

"Yes," conceded Jerimy, wishing, as he had wished many times before, that he had devoted less time to details that day two years ago when first he had told Joan her story. That telling had been hard. He had felt that its completion would bring with it the end of that relationship which existed between his idol and himself. He believed that at the end, when she had come to know how little claim he had upon her, she would scorn him, uncouth, rough man that he was. And he had wandered into long, halting descriptions of that memorable night. He had found a respite in verbosity. And even now, two years later, Jerimy's ruddy face grew a shade ruddier whenever he recalled that lack of faith in his Joan.

He would never forget the white little face that had lifted to his, the wide, half-frightened eyes that clung to his own, or the feel of the trembling young arms around his neck as she had wanted to know if now he were going to "send her away." He would never forget the passionate love words that she had whispered in his ear at that very moment when his own words had severed the relationship which she had beleived in.

"And she ain't ever forgot a one of them details," he ruminated joyously, as he looked down at her now. He laid a broad, blunt-fingered hand with awkward tenderness on the folded arms.

"Yes," he continued, "there was the lights. And back of me was the House of Parlyment. I was just thinkin' about hittin' the road when Big Ben up there in the Parlyment tower begins to ring. I counted the strokes. Ten! It sounded kind of solemn-like. And then— all to once I hears somethin' else— somethin' faint and smothered-like."

Jerimy coughed convulsively. Demmit all! Whenever he talked about that night, he acted like somebody that was drownin' and a-suckin' water into their windpipe, only he sucked smoke into his'n.

He coughed again raucously, took up an inch in his elastic braces as if preparing for a fray, elevated one stooped shoulder and then the other until both were properly squared, ran his stubby, big-jointed fingers through the grizzled hair of his bared head, and squinted his faded old eyes at the moon.

"And then?" whispered the girl at his side.

"Then I turned round and I says, says I: 'What t'ell

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was that noise?' And I turned my lamps to that parapet. Wa'n't nothin' there! Then I squat down and pierces the shadders at the end of the bridge, my glims a-burnin' about forty candle power. And all to once I sees it. I was sure it was the right article, 'cause I heard that faint sound again. It was like somebody a-sawin' on the G string of a fiddle, and it come straight from that basket. Yes'm, that's what it was. A basket!" Jerimy shook his cotton handkerchief in the breeze and again mopped his perspiring old face.

Joan made no effort to hurry him now. Her eyes had grown dark, her clasped fingers tense, and her breath was held bated in her slender throat.

"Well, I takes it up sort of gingerly, and draws back the cloth cover, and—there was—a *baby*! All pink and soft as a bonbon in a Fifth Avenue window. And it cooed up at me—like the little coquette that it was! The idear of cooin' up at a old plug like me! Me, that was so stove-up and no-account that my hoofs wouldn't be worth nothin' at a glue factory! Me that was so natcherly ugly that no member of the gentler sex had ever looked at me twice if she could help it.

"Well, that little lady didn't seem a bit hard to please, for it was plain as the nose on my face that it was a case of love at first sight. There wa'n't no other way I could figger it out, seein' that her little round cheeks was all wet with the tears she'd been a-sheddin', and that now she was a-smilin' and a-cooin' at me like a lady that was a-goin' to ask me for the loan of some money. But she didn't need to *ask* for nothin' that I was able to earn, beg or steal for her—that little lady didn't! No, ma'am!

From that moment I wa'n't nothin' but her willin' slave. There wa'n't nothin' I had or that I could get but what was her'n if she was a mind to take it. If she'd 'a looked up right then, afore we'd been acquainted more'n ten seconds, and of asked me to get Big Ben for her, demit, I'd of clumb up that old tower and of got that clock or died *a-tryin'* to get it."

Jeremy mopped at his brow ostentatiously and dabbed at his blinking eyes surreptitiously. Joan moved her head slowly and looked up at him, her fingers tightening their clutch on his arm.

"Where was I?" Jeremy pretended to think. "Oh, yes. I was havin' a little flirtation with my new friend and a-feelin' a little modest-like under her admirin' gaze. Well, I says to myself, says I: 'Jeremy McChesney (that was my monicker in them days) you'd better be a-thinkin' about what you're a-goin' to do with your lady friend.' And I thunk. And the more I thunk the more I knowed that there wa'n't nothin' but one thing that the king himself could *make* me do. I knowed that I was a-goin' to hang onto the only female critter that'd ever looked my way 'thout actin' as if she'd et somethin' that didn't agree with her. I knowed that I was a-goin' to go on masqueradin' as a gentleman to the lady that didn't know no better. There was worship in her eyes, and I felt like I'd licked the Kaiser with one hand tied behind me, and every time she cooed, I felt like somebody was a-makin' a presentation speech while the king pinned some more medals on my coat. There wa'n't the least doubt about what I was a-goin' to do with her. I knowed. And I reckon she knowed, too, for she giggled right out loud

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when I picked her up and cuddled her under my coat."

There was a pause in which Jerimy made vain efforts to extricate himself from his clothing through a collar that was malevolently proving too small for the purpose. Joan shook his arm gently and whispered softly:

"Go on, Uncle Jerry. You—you cuddled her up under your coat——"

"Yes. And I remember that my hands was so big and awkward that I was scared I'd drop her, she was that soft and little. But she nestled her round little head down against the roll of fat on my ribs just as if she'd been a-huntin' quite a spell for the place, and was almighty glad she'd found it. And I kept my arm round her real careful-like, so as not to mash her, and begun lookin' around to see if I could make a get-away 'thout attractin' the unwelcome attention of a bobbie. There wa'n't none in sight, so I hikes for Great George Street a-holdin' that little warm lady friend clost to my old pumpin' machine, and a-tryin' to walk like a man with nothin' more'n a tumor on his side.

"When I got to my street I clumb up the stairs to my chambers, and I lit the gas jet that sputtered like as if it had asthmy, and brung you out from under my coat.

"Lord! But you made up for all I'd missed in them years when nobody wanted me for nothin' 'ceptin' to look after horse-flesh. You made up for the family I'd never had no chanct to have. You was so durned pretty and sweet and—and *you belonged to me!* I'd found you and—finders was keepers.

"You belonged to *me*. To me, old Jem Mack, infidel, tobacco chewer, and champeen oath-slinger of the old

Farnum Circus! Me, that'd been scared of women and children, and that'd lived alone with horses, tobacco and cussin'. You belonged to me, and I knowed that all hell couldn't take you away from me.

"You was asleep. Gone to sleep against that roll of fat over my ribs. Gone to sleep just as if you knowed it was all right, and that you was satisfied with any plans I doped out for you.

"Well, I laid you down on the bed, but not right away. Seemed as if I hated to let go of you. Seemed as if I was jealous of all them years when I hadn't had you, and that I was a-tryin' to make up for them all at once. But after a while I knowed I'd have to get a hump on me and get whatever things a lady, like my friend, was likely to need in the 'chambers' of a unmarried man. There wa'n't much that I could think of 'ceptin' milk. I didn't know much about babies of men, but shucks! I knowed babies of horses and I'd raised many a colt on a bottle. The only wonder is that I didn't want to feed you a gallon or two at a time, not bein' used to delicate appetites.

"So I laid you on the bed and stood there a-lookin' down at you, kind of warm and joyful-like, as if somebody had died and left me a few hundred millions of real U. S. money. I guess I must of been standin' there a long time afore I got hep to the fact that I wa'n't warm and joyful no more but just cold and shiverin' with a premonishin'. I'd piped off a folded scrap of paper that was pinned to my lady friend's white dress, and I reckon I'd been a-lookin' at it for some time. I was so durned scared that there might be a clue on that paper that'd make it possible for me to return you to the roof where

THE BUNDLE AT WESTMINSTER BRIDGE 61

you belonged, that I was sore tempted to take it off your little dress and burn it up 'thout readin' what it had to say."

Jeremy looked back over his shoulder at the square of light which shone through the padroom from the doors of the Big Top. Then his gaze wandered slowly round the lot, coming back at last to the straight, slim figure of the girl at his side. He coughed, ruffled his iron-gray hair with the stubby fingers of one rough, red hand, and whistled carelessly a bar of "Home, Sweet Home."

"And that note, Uncle Jerry? You finally read it, and it said——"

Jeremy stopped whistling abruptly and fell to gently pulling his left eyebrow, his heavy head bent to one side, his face turned from her.

"But what I want to *impress* on you, Joie, is that I was tempted to not read that paper 'cause of what it might say. If it give me a clue I would have to follow it up, bein' a decent citizen of the U. S., and not exactly hankerin' to be dishonest even if it helped me to keep them hundred millions. Now, what I'm a-wantin' to know to-night, Joie, is this—do *you* think I would of been past the forgiveness of—anybody, if I *hadn't* read that note but just burned it up? How would *you* of felt about it f'rinstance, if I had had to confess that to you?"

Joan did not reply at once. She stared straight ahead of her for a long moment, her small hands clasped together under her little round chin, the chin resting lightly upon them.

"What would you say, Joie, honey?" Jeremy persisted; and try as he would he could not quite keep an anxious

note from rising with humble appeal through the words.

Joan drew a long breath and laughed softly.

"And what would I say if you told me that Madame Bourret's trick canary had just killed Venus by twisting off her trunk, or that Smithy's trained flea had broken loose and killed a lot of keepers and canvas men? Well, I'd—I'd say: *impossible!*" She unclasped her hands and threw her arms about Jeremy's wrinkled neck. Very tenderly she kissed either of his weather-beaten cheeks. Then she released him with:

"But you must hurry along with the story, Uncle Jerry. And now about the—the note."

Demmit all! The note was simple enough, but what—God! What if he told her about— But he wouldn't! Hang it! He was soft as a woman. Why the devil did he even *think* of ever tellin' her? What she didn't know didn't hurt her and—but demmit! It hurt *him*! Made him stay awake of nights, unless he drugged the thing with whiskey. Now, if she'd of said that she could forgive him, no matter what he'd done, why then he'd have—but she hadn't said no such a thing and he'd ruther drown himself in hurt and whiskey than put a crimp in her love for him. If a-wantin' to keep her love was selfish, then he reckoned he was selfish with a capital "S."

"And the note?" reiterated Joan patiently.

"*Exactly!*" said Jeremy Kennerly. "The note! Funny! I'd plumb forgot just where we was in the narrytive. We'd just got to the note. *Exactly!*"

CHAPTER V

UNCLE TO THE QUEEN OF HEARTS

“THEY wa’n’t much wrote on that paper. Just a name and a date. It said: ‘Joan Kennerly, born February 14, 189—! They wa’n’t nothin’ else. Just that. Well, that didn’t give me no clue to speak of, ‘ceptin’ your age, which I figgered was five months that day, and so I put it away in a tin box that I had bought to keep a few hundred bonds and the likes in (but which had never got no other occupants but broken pencils, old circus contracts and a bunch of rubber bands that had got all gummed together). And I says, says I: ‘Jerimy McChesney, they ain’t nobody that’s got any claim onto your handle. They ain’t nobody a-goin’ to ever ask about your pedigree, not bein’ a blooded animal, and you’d better adopt your lady friend’s monicker. It’ll be easier and better for her than to saddle her with your’n or even to lettin’ you each keep your own. There’ll be fewer questions to refuse to answer or to lie about if your names is the same, and ’twouldn’t be fair to your friend to take her’n away from her and load her up with a name like *McChesney*.”

“So I stuck McChesney into my pipe with a pinch of dry-cut tobacco and smoked it up, right there beside my friend. And when I went to sneak out of that room a

minute later I was Mr. Jerimy Kennerly, uncle to the Queen of Hearts.

"I snuk down them creaky stairs and out into the street. Just around the corner was High Holborn Road. I hiked round that corner like a racing car in a hurry. It took a little spell to locate a dairy, but at last I found one. It was closed, but, Hell! they was cans of milk inside, and nothin' but glass between me and a nice dinner for my lady friend, and if the dairy guy hadn't popped into his shop from the rear when I pounded on his door, I'd of smashed the durned window.

"Then I does a Marathon back to my chambers, a-stop-pin' at a drug shop on the way and buyin' a nursin' bottle. You was still asleep, but I ain't no more'n got the milk a-warmin' over the gas jet, in a pan I'd borrowed from the landlady a few days before to warm my shavin' water in, than you wakes up and gives a little sobbin' cry. Soon as I picked you up you stopped cryin', though, and smiled and crinkled your wet eyes at me. I was so cussed conceited at that minute that I wouldn't of changed places with the President of the U. S. or a Senator from Idyho, and my heart was a-actin' like a Barney Oldfield.

"Well, I fixed that milk with you a-hangin' over one arm, like as if I'd been a matron in the nursery of an orphanage. And then I held you on my lap while you tugged at your bottle and coquetted with me, like the devilish little flirt that you was.

"That night I never slept a wink. I couldn't have wunk if I had tried. I just set in a squeaky rockin' chair and looked at the little round head pressed tight against my shirt front, and the little body that was

wrapped up in a clean night shirt of mine, and reckoned that I must be dead and in the Heaven that I'd always heard so much about and never believed in. I reckoned nobody could feel so downright happy unless they *was* in Heaven, and that it was pretty grand gettin' a free pass into it when I hadn't never believed nothin' about it afore.

"I could feel your little breath through my shirt and, Lord! I'd had strong whiskey in my time, whiskey that'd burn the insides out of a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store, but I'd never had nothin' that'd burned into me like that little milky breath of your'n. It seemed to sort of eat its way clean through me. And once when one of your little pink feet kicked its way out of that night shirt, I took it in one of my big hands and — and I — I bent over it and kissed it. And, demme! I wa'n't even ashamed of it, nuther. I was gettin' too conceited to blush when I kissed ladies' feet. I'd gone plumb dippy.

"As I was sayin', I set up all night and held my new family in my lap. Along about daylight, you wakes up and demands another dinner, and who was I to argue with a lady? So I fixes it and puts you and it on the bed in close company. Then I packs my grips and gets ready to leave my present domicile. About eight o'clock I paid my bill and you and me sought another home. I got you out of the house 'thout the landlady a-seein' you. When an unmarried man rents a sleepin'-room from one of them kind of women he ain't supposed to have ladies callin' on him. And if one *should* call in the night when the watch dog is in bed, then it's up to the gentleman to smug-

gle her out of the house as soon as he can persuade her to go. Now, I didn't try to persuade you to go, for I knowed that where you went there was I a-goin', and so we watched our chanct, after we'd settled our bill, and snuk out when the coast was clear.

"After that"—the voice that had grown husky paused for an instant—"after that," it repeated, "we hung around London for a spell, a-settin' in out-of-the-way corners of parks where men played cricket, when the days was too warm to stay indoors; and a-drinkin' milk and a-sleepin' real peaceful at night. And then one day we come to America. I'd told you a good deal about it and you was dead anxious to see it, I could tell by the way you looked when I talked to you about it. And when I'd told you about the old Farnum Circus you'd kicked your heels into the air like a reg'lar acrobat.

"O' course I had to make up a awful lie for the circus gang when the season opened that year. And it was a long time afore they could forget that I was McChesney and could call me Kennerly, and I reckon it was some longer time afore they quit wonderin' about the change in monicker; but pretty soon everybody loved you so much they forgot to ask questions about my sister and brother-in-law that had died over in London.

"Mother Wilson grannied you and the rest of the women mothered you, but demme! I never got over bein' conceited 'cause I knowed that it was *me* that you *belonged* to and *me* that you loved.

"And now," Jerimy sighed, "you're a real grown-up lady, and—and—" he meant to say: "you're old enough now to hear the rest of the story and to judge me as you

will," but instead he laid a hand fondly on the head that came just to his shoulder, and said: "and that's all—for to-night, Joie."

Joan breathed a long breath and moved nearer to him. Her riotous, fragrant hair touched the seamed face that bent to meet it. The heavy hand slid from her head and fell to a place on one of her shoulders, the big arm drawing her yet closer to his great breast. For a long, tense interval they were silent.

Suddenly:

"What the devil are you a-cryin' for, Joie?" Jerimy's lined face worked convulsively and he swallowed something that had been on the verge of choking him, before he could repeat with what he considered sufficient gruffness: "Demmit! What *are* you cryin' for, anyway?"

"I—I'm not crying, Uncle Jerry. It's my eyes. I reckon they got filled with dust to-day. And then, too—I—I'm still *punched in at the stomach*." She smiled whimsically.

Jerimy's eyes twinkled. This was his little girl once more. He bent his great head and smiled down into the lifted face.

"And is your throat a-troublin' you?"

"Something awful, Uncle Jerimy. It's swollen tight as a drum."

Jerimy chuckled.

"Same here. Reckon there must 'a been a draught round these parts. 'Pears like as if my Adam's apple is a-tryin' to get out, after all these years of bobbin' up and down respectable-like whenever I et or drunk anything. It's just got sore at somethin', I calc'late, and it's

a-tryin' its durndest to get away from me. I've swallered it a couple of times but it don't stay swallered same as other things. It bobs right back into my throat and gets busy again."

The girl at his side laughed softly. It was a rainy little laugh, that made the old man smell rainbow-lighted clover after a spring shower. His large-jointed fingers pushed their way into the tumbled mass of bronze hair.

"Are you glad to be here, honey, stead of off in one of them schools? Are you real sure that you wouldn't ruther I'd 'a brung you up in a school where you would of growed up knowin' nothin' about the gypsy life of a circus?"

A wistful note crept into the husky voice and rose until it was a cry that sounded—sweetly plaintive and appealing—above the pride that had tried to force a gay tone.

The girl nodded her head emphatically; then her eyes drooped until the long, glistening, dark lashes lay like a wet fringe against the soft, smooth skin of her delicately rounded cheeks. Her fingers toyed with the massive gold chain which hung from the man's trouser pocket.

After a while she lifted her eyes once more to his face, and by aid of the dim light that filtered out to them through the canvas wall at their backs, Jeremy saw that the laugh had gone out of them and that a sweet seriousness clouded their velvety depths.

"It—it isn't much of a story, is it, Uncle Jerry?"

Hang it! When her voice trembled like that, goose-flesh stood out on him until you could strike a match anywhere on his consarned old body.

"Do you think, Uncle Jerry," she went on, "that—that my mother was—*married*? That I—am——"

Jerimy caught her by the two shoulders and roared like a lion suddenly angered.

"Illegitimate? Is that what you're a-wantin' to know? God! If anybody but you had even *hinted* at that—I'd—God! I'd of broke every demmed bone in his body. You're a lady, demmit! Ain't I told you lots o' times that I was sure you was of *noble blood*? Ain't I? Do you look like the other women round here? Ain't you knocked the spots off the good looks of any woman in the show—or—or in America for that matter? And—and besides, would they of put a name on that paper if—if—" he spluttered off into silence.

His face had grown red and then purple. His faded blue eyes had gleamed like points of steel in the moonlight. His hands had gripped Joan's shoulders like bolts that were being screwed into the tender flesh. Now, of a sudden, the shaggy eyebrows lifted. The hairy back of a wide square hand had dulled the points of steel and left a suspicious moisture in the filmy eyes, as it slid stealthily across them. The other hand crept up from the small shoulder to a soft, round cheek, and caressed it gently.

"I'll be jiggered!" he ejaculated mournfully. "I'll be jiggered! Here I've spent a good half hour a-tellin' a story to a young lady and she ain't even grateful. Just begins to say spiteful things about a friend of mine that I met in London some years ago, like as if she was jealous or somethin'. She might have some respect for *my* feelin's in the matter. When this lady friend of mine

met me, I didn't ask her no questions and she didn't ask me none, and now along comes a young woman who gets inquisitive. It hurts like—like *Hell!*"

Joan put up her arms and drew the iron gray head down to her breast. Remorsefully she patted the apoplectic cheek.

"There, there! Goosie! I—I didn't mean it! Honest truly I didn't!"

At her words Jerimy's heart went back to its normal routine. He saw in them a ray of hope, hope that she would banish from her mind the miserable thought which had been there but a moment ago. The sly old dog let his head rest a little heavier against the girlish bosom, and he muttered almost incoherently:

"Then you'll promise to mind your old fool of an uncle, and never again get such downright wicked thoughts in your little thought incubator?"

Joan patted his leathery cheek tenderly.

"I promise," she said, "never to—to speak of such a thing again, Uncle Jerry. And——"

"And now," Jerimy sighed heavily, "I gotta get over to the horses. Them grooms have ossified brains, and couldn't never get a kinker ready for a number right on time if I wa'n't a-cussin' somewhere in the background."

"Run along, then, but—but don't go and get twisted, will you, Uncle Jerry. 'Most everything's got twisted to-day! 'Most everything but you. And don't you—'cause you're—you're too fat to twist comfortably, and—and you know your braces aren't any too reliable *now*." She giggled up at him with a warning shake of her head.

But Jerimy, making nothing of what she said, put her

abruptly from him and lumbered off toward the lighted door of the horse tent.

Joan, left alone, clasped her two hands behind her head and raised her face wonderingly to the stars.

"Even Trixie Snyder has a history. She has a family, the memory of a—a father. I—I'm a—a nobody. I—haven't anything," she confided to the firmament sorrowfully. Then: "But I don't care. Do you hear? I don't care a rap." She stamped her foot emphatically. "I've got Uncle Jerry, and—and I'm going to marry Philip." She looked round at the lot speculatively. "It must be time for Phil and the elephants to be down at the cars. And I reckon I'd better go down right away and tell him, because—because I—I just guess I couldn't ever get to sleep to-night till I'd told him."

CHAPTER VI

MISS TNT

JERIMY KENNERLY came out of the horse tent and strode slowly toward the Big Top. He was whistling softly, over and over again, the first few bars of "Home Sweet Home."

There was no dissipation in which Jerimy indulged with such frequency, or which served its purpose so well as those few measures of the only song he had ever learned. His dear Lady Nicotine—even his occasional "two fingers of rye"—never soothed as did that "Home Sweet Home" so unmusically whistled. And at those rare times when it failed to soothe, at least it served to hide from others his exact mental condition.

Jerimy paused in the padroom and stood whistling softly, pausing only when a groom came or went, and then but to give a curt order, or to pour forth a volley of explosives. He had that dull ache in his heart again, and he was desperately afraid that somebody might sense it; and Jerimy could have tolerated anything better than that some ferret-eyed, fox-nosed person should come Sherlock Holmesing around his private business.

He sat down on the long tongue of Zetta's lion wagon and mechanically he took out his large, discolored, bone-handled pocket knife. Then, for want of something bet-

ter to whittle, he began slowly to sharpen a blunt, stubby pencil. When the pencil had dwindled until little remained but the tin band and the rubber, he tossed it with an oath into the shadows behind him.

"Durned old fool!" he muttered scornfully, snapping shut the blade of his huge knife.

Then he fell to pulling his short, square-tipped fingers, cracking the joints noisily, and again he whistled softly, painingstakingly.

When Jerimy had found Joan that long ago night he had felt suddenly richer than a world of Rockefellers. (What was money compared to a bit of a lady who snuggled down close to his pulsating breast!) As he had said, he sat all that night with the tiny waif pressed to his heart. The next day he had moved. The day after that——

The day after that *he had seen that advertisement in the personal column of the London Times*. He had read it over and over again. It had said:

"Will party finding basket at Westminster end of Westminster Bridge on night of July 30th, 189—, please communicate with advertiser in reference to contents of said basket? Important!"

That was all. But it had been quite enough to send Jerimy off into veritable chills and fever.

So they wanted it back again!

He had held the little bundle tighter to him, and had stroked with trembling, awkward fingers the soft locks of silky hair on the small head against his breast. So they

had changed their minds! They had decided that, after all, they wanted the treasure which they had abandoned!

Well! They could keep on a-wantin'! And their unworthy minds could *rot* afore they'd get back the lady who had thrown her lot in with his'n with such ready trust and confidence. He'd see all the world sunk to the bottomless pit of—a demmed hot place—afore he'd break this perfectly agreeable partnership. He'd like to see the size of a man who could step in between him and his lady friend!

And Jerimy had crushed the paper as though it were the man or the woman who would attempt to rob him of his first loved possession. Then he had laid his sleeping treasure on the bed and had stood heating a pan of milk above the sputtering gas jet until his arm had ached and had gradually become numb. And he had delighted in the ache and had smiled at the numbness. She was worth a lot of aching arms. Just buying milk and rocking her to sleep was not enough to prove to her his willing bondage. He wanted to ache for her! He wanted to hurt for her!

Very jealously Jerimy had set about covering his tracks. He moved from pension to lodging house, and from lodging house to pension. Through the hours of the day he whistled to his baby, rocked her, tossed her over his head, and held the bottle to her drowsy lips. But when the hours of night came Jerimy would sit staring into space, his unwilling thoughts on the empty cradle that was somewhere in that sleeping London.

Very gradually his conscience wore him threadbare. Then one day, unable longer to endure its accusations,

he had consigned the baby to his landlady's care, and taken an omnibus down to The Strand, from there striding heavily and with unwilling feet down Fleet Street. Crossing Ludgate Circus, he had paused at a bar where he swallowed a stiff drink; then he had swung off into Queen Victoria Street, keeping rigidly to the pace which he had set for his reluctant feet, until he had pushed his way through the doors of *The Times* office.

Without pausing to think of just what he should say, he had crossed the room and stopped before a small wicket above a polished counter. To the clerk behind it he spoke, gruffly, brusquely. He wished to know, he said, who and where was the party whose advertisement had been signed B. 32 in the issue of their paper that day a week previous.

He had stood there leaning heavily against the counter, and the clerk had looked at him suspiciously. Then he had learned that the journal kept no record of such advertisers beyond the limit of the "run" of their advertisement.

His heart had leaped into a wild song. The weights had fallen from his feet and breast. Taking a sovereign from his pocket he had flung it on the counter and had watched it roll under the small grilled wicket. Then he had strode hurriedly away.

A day had come when Jerimy sailed for home, accompanied by his "lady friend." And for a long time the skeleton in his closet had lain quiet and apparently harmless. The baby's plump little arms learned to tighten themselves round his thick, red neck. The rosebud mouth learned to kiss the leathery cheeks, the baby fingers

learned to pull the shaggy eyebrows less harshly and more playfully. The lisping tongue learned to say "Unt Jewwy." And Jerimy McChesney, alias Kennerly, was happy far beyond his wildest dreams. He had an idol, and never was an idol more worshiped. But one day when Jerimy lay sleepless in the narrow berth of an F. & W. car. It grinned at him through the darkness. It mocked him. It laughed at his happiness. It shook a bony finger at him with terrifying menace. It reached out its fleshless arms toward the little golden head that was pillowed on his breast. And there in the darkness of the nights, Jerimy cursed it back again into its closet.

But after a while—about the time when the idol had reached her second year, and a committee, consisting of Mother Wilson, Lawson and Jerimy, himself, had decided that the young lady was getting old enough to have a berth of her own in one of the ladies' sleepers—the skeleton became bolder and less easily subdued.

It began to come out of the closet at all sorts of times and places, and it rattled its dry bones tauntingly at the man who was learning to fear it. It called him a thief—and it told him that perhaps he was no less than a murderer; that the one who had advertised had probably died of grief when no response had come to that plaintive, repentant plea.

Poor Jerimy! He fought the thing desperately, but what could one do to vanquish an adversary that did not exist in material form; a foe that laughed sardonically at your efforts to defend yourself and who was never there when you struck at him?

Thus Jerimy's house of happiness rocked dangerously,

threateningly, terrifyingly. Remorse clawed so frequently at the foundations that it was to be wondered at that the walls did not crumble, disintegrate and fall back into an abyss of regret.

But the happiness had come to Jerimy so very late. So many years it had eluded him, so divinely sweet was it now that it was his at last, that it was not to be easily wrenched from him. He hugged it to him with one hand, while with the other he wrote checks for London newspapers. He denied to the skeleton that he had any remorse, and then straightway sent advertisements broadcast over England in an endeavor to get into communication with that other advertiser whose advertisement years before had gone unanswered.

Not that Jerimy had a very keen sympathy for those whom he felt he had robbed. It was not so much for them—if at all—that he employed detectives and spent money like veriest water in his efforts to locate them, but because of the little idol. Over there in England was an estate—one of those very old, very famous estates—and perhaps a title belonging to his golden-eyed fairy. (Jerimy felt positive about the estate and almost certain about the title—Demmit! You had only to look at the tiny hands and feet of her, at the aristocratic carriage of her lithe young body, and at the exquisite features of her lovely face, to know that some of England's best blood ran in the veins of her!) And Jerimy sought to repair whatever wrong he had done the child, for whose sake he would have laid down his life.

Sometimes, as the years brought with them no results from the money that dribbled out of his check-book and

flew across the seas, he scarcely knew—poor worshipin remorseful Jerimy!—whether he was most glad or mo sorry. If he succeeded in finding her people, by the very same stroke he would lose her, and the loss of her would be a million times worse than death. Yet—his loss would be her gain. By it she would come into her own. How many times he had need to remind himself of that. For there were times when his forced confronting of future *sans* Joan wavered tremulously; times when his grim determination almost failed him, when his silent abnegation of any claim upon her toppled, became reluctant and grudging.

Each of the passing years became a respite that soldered him to her with a bond of love which grew infinitely greater each day. When the years had begun to number in two figures, his fears had lulled. The chance of finding those who would claim her, who would wrest her from him, became slight, very nearly none at all. But checks continued to flutter into envelopes that were addressed to a detective agency beyond the Atlantic. For some time now Jerimy had been sending them with a sense of joyousness—a feeling that he was paying for his sweet draught of happiness.

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Joan picked her way round the side of the dressing-room, instinctively stepping round a stake where no stake could have been seen by an inexperienced eye. She reached out her hand and touched the guy lines of the

dressing-tent as she passed them, yet they were all but invisible in the pale, fitful light.

Near the door she stopped for a moment at the edge of a group of men and women in various stages of arena or street dress. The little Hollander, owner of the trained bears, stood close to the canvas, in a woe-begone bathrobe which plainly evidenced the treachery of dye, and which was girded about his loins by a pair of much-darned tights. He was nursing a scratched finger while his plump, apple-cheeked girl-wife hovered anxiously above the bandaged digit, in her maternal concern too occupied to take part in the chattering of the others about her.

A man dressed for the races which would close the show was talking excitedly about single tax, while a pretty little woman in a long purple silk cape wanted to know if her "web-work" had gone well to-night, and if her new purple outfit was becoming.

As Joan came up to them, her friend Medea, who had been discussing her slack-wire work with her property man, turned toward her and smiled.

"I thought you'd gone down to the sleepers," she remarked, passing a bare arm around Joan's lithe waist. "And I was wondering why you'd forgotten to tell me good night. Where have you been, dear?"

"Mooning with Uncle Jerry." Joan indicated the far side of the tent.

One of the men took off his little red satin jockey cap and bowed mockingly before her.

"May I inform Your Royal Highness," he drawled in humblest servility, the gay jockey cap crumpled against

the left side of a white satin shirt, "that Lawson has been looking everywhere for you? He'd collared a cartoonist who thought he might like to sketch you, and he couldn't find any of the F. & W. press men to handle him. He brought him around here himself and called in to Granny Wilson to ask you to come hither. But you didn't, Miss Kennerly. You were off some place, thither or whither, and Lawson, after handing out a lot of bull about not liking to bother the star at such an hour, especially after such a hot day, just rolled his eyes wrong side out and almost flipped a fit. Him, that wouldn't care if it was the hour of judgment and St. Peter was waiting to let the good little F. & W.'s through to the big show, if a newspaper fellow came along and looked ready to fall for some bunk press stuff, Your Majesty," again the low bow, "you will surely hear from his nobs in the morning."

"And what dost thou care, man of my stables?" Joan drew up her slight figure and looked at him haughtily.

"You're wrong, Joie," cried a bald little man from behind. "When you and Bowlegs play this Queen stuff, you always say 'dust' and while I know Bowlegs is dust all right, still to be real Shakespearian you should say 'dudst.' It's more euphonious, you know."

"You're de trop, Baldy. There's no doubt about that, is there, Your Majesty?" Then, complainingly, "I can't see why you have him about, Your Highness. He's up to his neck in intrigue. You see how he listened just now to what I had to tell you about Lawson?"

"But I don't care a rap about Lawson's cartoonist. I don't want to be put in a cartoon. Cartoons are *funny*, and—I don't feel *funny*—not one single bit!"

"But the funniest cartoons are the sad ones, my dear," expostulated the little man, winking mischievously at Medea. Then frowning deliciously all over his round bald head: "'S no use, ladies and gentlemen! Miss Kennerly is brewing for a—a storm. Better stand aside and allow the lady to pass. Miss TNT, were you wishing to enter the dressing-tent?" He waved a fat arm eloquently, and that part of him which protruded roundly above blue serge trousers shook with merriment.

Joan looked at him through a fringe of dark lashes, and the corners of her mouth dimpled.

"No, I wasn't wishing to go into the tent, I was just wishing your machinery wouldn't vibrate so, Baldy. Vibration—too much vibration—isn't good for motor boats or automobiles, or—or bald little men!"

A burst of laughter showered above the fat man's head.

"She's had a row with somebody"—Baldy defended himself deprecatingly—"and she hasn't had a chance yet to break up anything."

"I would like to break something." Joan nodded her tawny head. "I could go in and smash my own trunk, but you can't get much fun out of breaking your own things."

"Go on, Bowlegs, offer yours for the sacrifice," urged a soft-eyed woman in spangled skirts. "It isn't much good anyway. You've been going to buy a new one every season for ten years."

"Yes," responded the jockey. "I know it, but she wouldn't want to hurt the aged. Besides, she could wreck it with a hairpin, and she wants a trunk with some resistance."

"Lots of resistance!" affirmed Joan emphatically.

"What's the matter with Longshanks?" somebody asked, and the group turned banteringly to a long-limbed fellow at Joan's left.

The man drew a bath towel closer about the shoulders that were bare above the confines of a gaudy silk undershirt, and shook his head sorrowfully.

"My trunk is of the indestructible kind. Miss Joan would be cheated," said he with the flicker of an apologetic smile at Joan.

"I reckon after all," Joan sighed in mock disappointment, "that I'll just have to—to blow up." She smiled ruefully. "It's awful to feel like what you just called me—TNT. Philip says TNT is the most terrible explosive there is—and that's what I feel like." The smile trembled a little and at once the spirit of jest fell away from the group of friends surrounding her. One of the women in street garb approached her.

"You are not well, Joie. Better go down to the car," she said solicitously, laying her muscular, jewel-crusted fingers on the girl's arm.

"Yes," coaxingly added Medea, with a slight pressure of the scarcely matured waist. "You are dressed"—touching the sleeve of the thin linen blouse—"and you ought to go at once. You are tired, and you don't know it."

Joan moved her head from side to side and made a little dissenting gesture with one hand.

"I—I feel like I wouldn't *ever* sleep again. I reckon powder magazines are 'most too excited to sleep." She tried bravely to make a *moue* at the little crowd of faces

that were looking down at her with so much tender solicitude, but the grimace was a pathetic failure. A hateful moisture had come into the large topaz eyes, and the red mouth had moved convulsively.

"There's a mighty lot of cigarette and pipe smokin', and the strikin' of matches out here for a powder magazine, Miss Joie," ventured the little bald man experimentally. "Maybe you'd be safer in bed." He rolled a cigarette deftly as he spoke, his words coming from between his teeth where was caught the end of the drawstring of a tobacco pouch that dangled against his several chins.

"And it's getting late," reminded the woman whose jeweled hand still rested on the girl's bare arm where the linen sleeve was rolled carelessly back. "The last number is on and the Wild Westers are already in the padroom awaiting their turn. Granny Wilson would not be a bit pleased if she knew that the little daughter of the F. & W. was still at large."

Joan sighed.

"I don't care," she said, staring at the curtain of darkness which lay just beyond the crowd of solicitous faces. "I don't care a snap about how late it is, I'm *not* little any more, I'm a grown-up woman. And I don't care about the cigarettes and pipes either. I guess the sooner I blow up, the better. I suppose, though, I ought to go a little way from the lot to do it. I—I reckon I've been enough trouble to everybody in the F. & W. without completely destroying a pile of good canvas and a lot of perfectly nice people." She dug the back of one tanned little hand into the hollow at the corner of one misty eye, for all the world like a tired, sleepy child, and then she

smiled whimsically and not quite steadily. "I've a dreadful headache and—and I might cry if anybody petted me or looked sorry for me, and—and I don't want to cry. I'm a grown-up woman, and *women* never cry, do they?—unless—unless they've had a quarrel with their husbands, and I haven't any husband. Besides," she dimpled adorably, "crying makes me *snivel*, and I *hate* sniveling."

"You're tired, dear." Medea put a finger under the girl's chin and lifted her face until the flickering gas light fell full upon it. "You're tired and I'm going to send you straight off to bed."

"Not just yet, Medea. I've something to say to the young lady before she goes down to her car," came a curt voice from the farthest edge of the group.

Blake pushed his way into the center of the interested ring, his high silk hat shining arrogantly, his dapper little figure very pompous and self-conscious in its black creased trousers and its clawhammer coat, a huge diamond lighting like a corner lamp post what seemed to be a block of white shirt front, his glistening dark eyes fixed sternly upon the sweet young face of Joan Kennerly.

It was the moment during which the Big Top was cleared of all who honestly "had not the price," and of those who less honestly "did not care" for the Great Wild West performance—which could be seen by: "Simply remaining in your seats, ladies and gentlemen, and buying your ticket from the ushers who will rapidly make the rounds. This completes the regular pa-form-ance. The Great Wild West Show is an extra attraction for which we make the ridiculously small charge of umpty cents!" It was a moment which gave the equestrian

director, or ring master as he has been called in earlier years, a much desired intermission.

Joan looked back into the bold dark eyes defiantly, but deep within her was a growing fear. And again she felt herself denuded. She shrank closer to Medea, and once, in a swift glance toward Longshanks, she sent a frightened appeal. But Longshanks, not good at interpreting such messages, glowered down at the intruder with nothing but the knowledge that he would dearly love to poke a big knuckle into each of those dark, flat-surfaced eyes.

Blake lifted a white-gloved hand and looked intently at its finger tips. For one brief moment the defiant eyes staring back at him shattered his equanimity. His carefully planned words quite escaped him. And to be thus disconcerted was not conducive to the quenching of the fires that were consuming his very being. For Blake to be thus suddenly silenced and nonplussed was an innovation on the lot of the F. & W. The girl's scorn and defiance ate like verdigris into his self-esteem, and though it dissipated a certain feeling of tenderness toward her, he felt with a strange quirk of physical reasoning that she was more than ever charming and maddeningly tempting. He raised his head and looked at her, compelling his eyes to an ophidian coldness, when in reality they burned in their sockets like living coals.

"I have learned that you had your horse saddled to-day, Miss Joan." (It had been Philip Dorset who had caused the prefix to be added to Joan's name at the time when the inch had been added to her skirts, and only a few privileged ones were permitted since to use the old endearing terms of "Joie" and "Little Joan.")

"My! Did it take you long?" Joan arched her delicate brows and yawned brazenly. Somehow, she felt that just when she was beginning to cultivate dignity and the airs of a real lady, somebody rubbed her fur the wrong way and made her claws come out; and Joan was suddenly ashamed of those little claws, suddenly aware that Philip would never approve of ladies who scratched even when the provocation seemed to justify the scratching.

Blake's mind never worked very rapidly through the maze of a conversation, but when it was pitted against the swift little brain of this girl whose topaz eyes flashed little tongues of flaming scorn at him, it stumbled and plodded aimlessly, helplessly, blinded by the smoke of her burning words.

He stared at her now blankly, and Joan explained mercilessly: "Did you have to study very hard to—to learn about the saddle?"

Blake's face flushed. He thrust his hands into the shallow pockets of his trousers because he had a vague idea that that act was one of disrespect when performed in the presence of ladies. His dark, closely cropped mustache drew back from his teeth in what he fondly believed to be a rigid smile of superiority.

"You know what the rules are about saddling a rosin-back," he pursued curtly, ignoring the taunting badinage.

"Aw, cut it out, Blake!" broke in Longshanks, thrusting his lean face forward into the light. "Cut it out! She hasn't hurt her horse. I looked myself to-night to see if that saddle had left a mark, and it hadn't. His coat was as smooth and glossy as the satin of her little ballet shoes. You ought to——"

"To let a common equilibrist like you dictate to me? Well, not for a while yet, Longshanks! Not for some little while. This young lady has got to learn that rules are not made to be broken."

"But I'm that stupid," cried Joan, shaking her lovely head dubiously, "that I'll have to have a much better teacher than you, Mr. Joy-killer. Teachers are supposed to induce thought, and you never make me think of anything except—Charlie Chaplin."

Blake cursed softly as a ripple of laughter went round the ring of delighted listeners. It was always so. She always made boomerangs of his veriest criticisms. When would he learn not to approach her when she was so well fortified with sympathizing friends?

"Saddling a rosinback and joy-riding him is positively forbidden, and you are well aware of that fact, yet you choose to ignore it. Your fine is three dollars. This is not your first offense, remember, and if we have to fine you again for a disregard of this same rule we will make it very much heavier." He turned and pushed through the line.

"Ted's *my* horse," she called after him, "and I'll ride him when and where I choose, Charlie Chaplin, and if I can't use a saddle on him then I'll ride him bareback through the towns and give little free shows going and coming. As for my *first offense*—I—I reckon that happened—when I was *born*." The last sentence wavered strangely, unexpectedly.

There was an uneasy shuffling of feet, and several throats were cleared in unison. Somebody remarked that a storm had been predicted for to-morrow, and somebody

else said it was time they got down to the cars. Then silence closed in upon the group, and its members gradually drifted their several ways.

For a long time Joan and her friend stood silent together. Finally Joan spoke:

"I—I guess I'll be going down to the car, Medea. Good night." She lifted her face and her friend bent and kissed her.

"You should have gone with some of the rest. Now there doesn't seem to be any one going. You'd better wait a moment and I'll go with you."

"Oh, I'll be all right! I don't need any one with me, honest truly." Joan drew herself up with an air of bravado.

"But the moon has gone down, dear. And it's quite a bit of a walk to the sleepers."

"And what difference does the distance and the dark make, pessimist? Haven't I only to scream 'hey rube' if I'm accosted by a townsman? And wouldn't a hundred circus men be on top of him in a twinkling? What's the use of having a signal like that if we can never use it? And anyway, I'd like to have all my circus *brothers and fathers* fight for me to-night. I'd like to sit on a rock beside the road and say 'sic 'em' every time they began to lose enthusiasm. And then I'd like one of them to turn about and beat me with a—a club! I—I'm sorry I was ugly to—to Blake."

"Yes. It wasn't nice, the thing you did, Joie, but you were tired," said the older woman indulgently.

Joan thought so, too, and promised rather falteringly that she would try to be less childish in the future, and

also that she would try to find some one to accompany her to the cars. Then she wandered off in the direction which led to the road.

She had gone but a step when she turned abruptly and made her way to the padroom.

Just inside the wide doors of the Big Top stood the equestrian director, toying idly with the lash end of a long whip. Joan told a passing property man to say that she wished to speak to him.

Blake heard the message without change of countenance but with a quick turn toward the door.

Joan looked at him as he came out to her, his flat eyes bent eagerly upon her, and regretted the good impulse that had driven her to him. But Joan always atoned. Apologizing was the one thing which Joan did as regularly as the things which necessitated the apologies.

"I'm sorry I was horrid to you," she began bravely, shrinking away from his out-stretched hand. "I'm ashamed and—and I hope you'll pardon me." Usually she said "forgive" but somehow "pardon" seemed a degree less humble, and she indulged herself to the scant extent of inflicting that lesser humiliation upon her rebellious pride.

"You—you"—Blake moved nearer to her.

"I'll try to be more decent and less—nasty," she urged herself on, "and I wish you'd forget——"

"Oh, that's all right, little one," replied Blake magnanimously, waving a gloved hand in a manner that was meant to sweep aside her transgressions. And he managed to smile at her almost paternally as he bade her good night.

Once beyond the entrance to the padroom, Joan glanced back over her shoulder. The equestrian director was standing just as she had left him, the light from the Big Top playing with the sheen of his high silk hat, the dark eyes still looking after her, that baffling, mysterious smile still lifting the corners of his thin lips.

CHAPTER VII

WOMAN PROPOSES

ALWAYS Joan had been sensitive to the strange oppressiveness of the dark. Darkness had weighed her down with its tantalizing mystery. It had seemed to harbor such terrifying monsters. It distorted the shapes of things, and it threw into weird relief hideous profiles against the sky at the tops of trees. Fierce, awful things were apt to rise up without warning before one, only to vanish as one advanced timidly toward them. And when one turned determinedly to face the *thing* that was blowing its fiery breath upon one's back, one found behind one nothing but the sepulchral gloom yawning dismally across a swallowed world.

But to-night a new Joan came out into the dark of a narrow road under a cloud-thickening sky; a Joan who did not even shiver when phantoms moved silently, stealthily ahead of her, and mournful sighs and moans came to her from the shapeless specters that loomed high and mysterious just beyond the long fences. To-night, if wild beasts had grinned at her from the blurred bushes and gloomy trees, she would have liked it—*almost*. But to-night, of all nights, the dark seemed oddly normal.

Dust lay thick beneath her small feet. Now and then she strayed into a rut, or, getting too near to the edge

of the road, stumbled over the exposed roots of a tree. But she went on mechanically, her mind busy with other things.

She was a—*mongrel*! And a mongrel was—oh, her dictionary had made it an *awful* word. She was scorned of the world! She, who had been so proud, so very proud to be a member of a circus. She, who had worshipped at the shrines of acrobats, equilibrists, aërialists, clowns; she was called—what was it Trixie had said the world called them? Such a queer, ugly lot of words! And Philip? Perhaps after all he wouldn't care so much about what the world said! Perhaps he wouldn't care at all!

She hummed a little tune softly, and even rattled her gold mesh bag contemptuously at the gaunt specters on either side of her.

But Philip might care about—about her being a nobody. He might care dreadfully when he knew that she hadn't any—any history or ancestors or *anything*.

There was a sigh now instead of the humming, and for a long interval she listened to the moans of the trees as she stumbled along beneath them. Then lights began to glimmer ahead, and along the road there came to her the familiar sounds which always accompanied the loading of the cars.

Gradually the rumble and buzz became separate and individual noises: creaking of wagon wheels, crisp orders of men in command, responses of workmen, trumpeting of elephants, the rattle and groan of wagon-cages, an occasional whistle, or the creak of tackle.

Joan crossed the railroad tracks and approached an

elephant, now faintly discernible in the dim circle of light which haloed a spot farther along.

How many hundreds of times had she stood within that circle of light and watched old Venus and Babe pushing, with their ponderous heads, the loaded wagons up the inclines to the flats! How many times had she stood there with Philip while his men had urged the elephants on to their work, prattling her nothings, and surreptitiously doling out peanuts to the long gray trunks which swung her way at every chance.

Once, she remembered, Philip had caught her in the act of giving a stale bun to the begging trunk of a greedy, lagging elephant, and he had scolded her and banished her from the charmed circle of light; sent her off to her sleeper with a severe frown, which had softened and disappeared only when she had humbly turned to obey him. She wondered now if it were not the unprecedented humbleness that had surprised him into relenting. She remembered that he had come after her down the cinder path beside the long train of cars, and had caught her in his arms and—kissed her.

● She felt those kisses now. They had been the very last he had ever given her, and she recalled to-night how hot his lips were and how tightly he had held her. But that was several years ago.

For a long time now he had been saying, when she had put up her mouth to him, that she was "getting too big to be kissed." But *that night*—he had pressed his lips to her eyes, her hair, and to her clinging hands. He had not touched her lips—she remembered that now.

Her small patent-leather pumps crunched the cinders

beneath her. Her skirts flapped in the midnight breeze. Wilful strands of curling, coppery hair blew about her piquant face, and just because she did not feel at all like whistling, she was whistling shrilly as she entered the circle of light.

Philip Dorset, leaning moodily against a telegraph pole, turned his head quickly, and some of the ice that had been stagnating his arteries melted suddenly.

"Did you come down that dark road alone?" he asked reprovingly, as he came hurriedly up to her. "Why will you be so reckless, Joan? Don't you know there are things of which you might well be afraid?"

"Circus people, for instance?" she suggested pointedly, letting him lead her away toward the telegraph pole; and the shrill little whistled tune began again where it had left off at his approach. But a single bar of it choked her.

She squeezed the hand beneath her arm.

"I—didn't mean that, Phil. Please don't be hurt by it. I reckon I'm *bad* to-night. I want to—to *scratch* things until they bleed. But don't scold me, Philip. I couldn't bear to have you scold me to-night."

"You're tired, dear. It's been a trying day. Unbearably hot!"

"And it's been a hundred years long, Philip!"

Philip Dorset did not ask the reason for that undue length. He knew. And again he cursed in his heart the gossip which had caused this day just past to fly off at a tangent on its century orbit.

"I know," he said gently. "But to-morrow the sky will be clear again."

They had reached the far rim of light, and Philip, his

face shadowed by the hospitable telegraph pole, paused, and taking one of Joan's hands in his patted it soothingly.

"*Will* things look different to-morrow, Phil? All those things that have messed up to-day?"

"It is not that they will look different to-morrow," he answered patiently; "it is simply that you have seen them wrong to-day. The heat has distorted, perverted things, dear. I've seen it make a mirage on the bare sands of a desert, showing seething cities of men where there was only scorched sand.

"Once I pitched my tent not a mile from a graveyard that rose magically out of the desert; knowing that the grinning white tombstones would wander away in the night. And they did! The next morning they had gone, and I left before the heat of the later hours would bring them back again. Sometimes we——"

He stopped short and moving away returned in a second with a camp stool. He urged her gently down upon it. A long silence ensued.

The girl rested an elbow on her knee and cupped her small round chin in the soft palm of her hand. The man beside her stood straight and stiff, as though he feared the yielding of a muscle. The imperturbable gray eyes were turned determinedly away from the hunched little shoulders and the small bronze head near his knees, and his well-shaped lips were set in an uncompromisingly straight line. And neither the man nor the girl saw the things at which they stared.

An occasional wagon rattled down the road from the lot, and its horses were unhitched with a metallic clanking of harness buckles. Men ran this way and that. Dogs

barked and horses neighed. Lanterns swung in complete circles, signaling to other lanterns farther down the tracks.

A droning of voices came now and then from the far side of the cars, and under the lamp-post, at the crossing, figures passed with increased frequency, heading toward the sleeping-cars which occupied another siding behind the brick station. Several times the tinkle of a woman's laughter came over the tops of the cars to the circle of light, and once or twice the deeper, harsher laugh of a man. A snatch of song would float through the night to be lost in the wood beyond. Night insect-life whisked buzzingly past one's ear. The leaves of the trees whispered together excitedly. Off somewhere in the depths of the darkness frogs croaked with melancholy monotony, and crickets chirped dismally. The telegraph wires overhead sang faintly. And above all was that unintelligible, sibilant sound of voices.

"Philip!"

The man leaning against the telegraph pole put one long hand up to his eyes, then, dropping it suddenly, bent his dark head and looked down at the girl who sat on the camp stool beside him.

"Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"You were going to tell me—something. Remember?"

"It was of no importance, Joan."

"Wasn't it?"—disappointedly. Then with face lifted earnestly to his: "There's something I ought to tell you, Philip. Something about *me*—about how I came to be here—with the circus." For a moment her gaze remained steady, then it wavered and fell.

"I know already, Joan." The man shifted his position nervously. "Your Uncle Jeremy told me your story on that day when first he told you."

Then Philip knew; had known ever since that distant day when she had come to know it! And he hadn't cared!

Her gaze drifted off again to one of the working elephants and she sighed softly, almost contentedly. But what if—what if it were to make a difference now! Oh, it couldn't! It couldn't! She bit her trembling lip with fierce, sharp little teeth.

"You see," she murmured, praying fervently to be contradicted, "I can't ever marry you, Philip, because I—don't know who I am." There was a quick intake of breath. "And it wouldn't be fair, would it?"

She looked up at him wistfully, hopefully, her small hands twisting together in her lap.

Philip Dorset lowered his eyes. He dared not look into the sweet, upturned face. He could not meet the imploring gaze that was fixed upon him. Ruthless emotions were rioting within him, tearing, battling, struggling!

With sardonic clearness came the thought that he had sacrificed this child at his side. Why had he never guessed that she might learn to care for him, whose love could lead her nowhere! But what could seventeen know of love; that insidious thing which had tortured him with its very sweetness, sleeping or waking, all these past months?

Yet had she not just spoken of marriage? he exulted. She loved him! But—*it couldn't be!* And after all, he had but to go away to undo whatever harm

he had done. And if—if she did care, ever so little (though he couldn't believe it), she would forget, once there was no more of this dear, sweet propinquity. Seventeen learned quickly and forgot easily. Yes. He would go away. He would——

"I guess you—you don't feel like talking to-night."

Through a nebulous mental cloud Joan's faltering voice reached him. He started and looked down at her sorrowfully. She was standing now, her face averted, only a delicate cheek visible and a blue-veined temple where tawny curls clung damply.

"Forgive me, Joan. I was watching Zetta's lion wagon as it boarded a flat. The cats hate the loading. You heard one of them roaring?"

Dimly he remembered that a lion had roared somewhere beyond that nebulous space from which he had just returned.

The girl's head moved and her face lifted slowly to his.

"I—I said that I didn't know who I was, and that to marry a—a gentleman like you, wouldn't be *fair*. It really wouldn't be, would it?"

"You are much too young, Joan, to talk such nonsense. And it's long past the hour when you should have retired." He looked at his watch with a reproving shake of his head.

"But it *wouldn't* be fair, would it?" Joan insisted beseechingly, her soft voice a bit less hopeful, her tense little face a shade more wistful.

"Why not? You do not know who I am, either," said Philip evasively, clenching his hands until the nails dug sharply into his palms.

Joan brightened.

"But I don't care about that, Philip. You are you! I don't care if you were—*christened* or—or not. I don't care what you are, Philip, or what you've done, even." She recalled how the mystery of his past, the silence of his unyielding lips, had set the gossips guessing, and she went on loyally.

"It doesn't make any difference to me, Phil, if—if you've *killed a man!*" In her anxiety to emphasize her words, her eager fingers fluttered out to his arm, and under their magic touch his muscles became taut.

"Joan!" Philip kept his hands pocketed with difficulty, but he frowned down at her sternly. After a moment he repeated her name more softly. "Joan, who and what I am, I cannot tell you. There are things in this life better left untold."

She came a step nearer and raised her face to his with that innocent sorcery, that unconscious seductiveness, that dangerously alluring wistfulness, which made her temptation incarnate.

Philip Dorset tried to look away, but the glowing amber eyes held him. His hands came from their hiding. His arms reached out to close round her. His face leaned nearer to hers. His breath fanned her cheek. Then, just as Joan felt the touch of his arms on her shoulders, they fell to his sides, inert, lifeless.

"May I smoke?" he asked, and to the harshness of his tone Joan gave no thought, but that he should, *could* want to smoke now—now when she wanted him to say *things* to her hurt dreadfully.

She nodded her head drearily, and a mist rose up be-

tween her and the man beside her, thickening to the density of fog, until she could scarcely see his stern face or the match which he lighted and held to the end of a long, black cigar.

"I—I reckon it's a different thing being a woman in a circus and being a man," she ventured tentatively. "I reckon the world don't call the men the names they have for the women. I guess maybe—you—you've got folks that'd never forgive you if you married a—a het—*heterogenesis*." For one brief instant her eyes twinkled. "I guess they'd think it was contagious and would lock the doors and—and hide when you brought it home." The twinkle faded to a damp ash as a little sigh fluttered up to the red lips from her slender throat. "Anyway, Philip,"—she said the name softly, caressingly—"I love you, and—and who *you* are doesn't matter to *me* at all."

She laid delicate emphasis on the pronouns, and her voice was pathetically tender, timidly reproachful.

Philip Dorset's breast became painfully constricted and his eyes stung as though burned by an arid wind or struck by the lash of a whip. He stared at his boots and cursed the destiny that was his.

He made an effort to speak, but words failed him. After all, what was there he could say? He could only listen and suffer, and let her think of him what she would.

"Don't you want me, Philip?" There was a haunting note of surprise and grief in her voice that cut him sharply. "Don't you *want* me?"

Philip gazed into the purple shadows beyond, miserable and passionately bitter. The croaking of frogs came to him from some distant pond blanketed and hidden by the

night. From away off somewhere a dog barked dismally. Crickets chirped everywhere, insistently, monotonously. Lanterns glimmered and signaled.

His hands closed and unclosed spasmodically. They ached to crush something. How unutterably hard it was! How almost impossible!

"Won't you ever, *ever* want me, Philip? Not even when I'm older and wear evening gowns with long trains to the theaters in the winters in New York? Not even then?" The touch of her pleading fingers on his arm sent tantalizing messages to his wretched heart. "Don't you think you—you'll *ever* want—me,—Philip?"

"Joan," he said very softly after a while when he dared trust his voice, "I'm not fit to touch the hem of your frock. You must forget to-night, dear, as if it had never been. Forget the things you have said. Put them back into your sweet heart, and some day you will thank me. Some day you will know how easily these first loves die. You are young and——"

Joan turned from him wearily, her small head drooping forlornly.

"Oh, yes!" She made a little despairing gesture. "I know—I'm young, and—I'll get over it! But"—she brushed the back of one hand impatiently across her eyes—"I won't! Do you hear me, Philip? I won't!" She stamped a small foot angrily and flung back her head impetuously.

Philip sighed with relief. Joan wistful and Joan angry were two vastly different Joans, albeit equally adorable.

"But you *are* young, you know. A mere child." He found himself actually smiling at sight of the flames

shooting up in the brilliant, gold-flecked eyes. "But there's nothing so easy to get rid of as youth, dear. You have only to wait long enough and it ebbs away from you. And the wait isn't long, either. It's pitifully short.'

Philip smiled sadly.

"The trouble is, we don't appreciate youth when we have it. We don't know that we are having fun at the time we are having it!"

Joan moved restlessly.

"Maybe that's the reason that I'm not screamingly hilarious right now!"

"You mean?"

"I mean that maybe I'm having a—lot of—of fun tonight, only I—I don't know it." She swallowed convulsively.

"You're tired."

"And young!"

"And overwrought." He ignored her laconic interpolation.

"And spurious."

"Joan! I forbade you to use that word!"

She gazed up into his blazing eyes with an unholy light in her own.

"Do you like—*mongrel* better?"

Philip made a quick movement and placed a hand over the tormenting lips.

"You shan't talk so. I won't permit it, Joan."

She looked at him defiantly; then tears sprang to her burning eyes, overflowed, ran unchecked down the lifted face and splashed against his fingers.

Those briny little tears put out the fire that was burn-

ing within him. Suddenly his hands fell from her.

"Dear, I can't bear that you should be unhappy. And you've such a lot to be happy for. You're a high-salaried star; loved by everybody! And there's—Uncle Jerimy!"

Joan sighed miserably and withdrawing her gaze leveled it at the line of cars at her left. Some one was whistling "Home Sweet Home" off there beyond those wagons, and a lump rose up in her throat.

She knew that the whistler was Jerimy Kennerly, and that at this moment he was either sad or lonely, or maybe both; and though painfully apparent were the efforts of the whistler to make the tune care-free and gay, to Joan it was unusually plaintive.

"Yes." She turned once more to Philip. "I've Uncle Jerimy. That's the best luck a girl ever had, that is, a girl who—had nothing else, no *family*, you know. And even he'd be better off if he didn't have me to worry about. I haven't anybody who really belongs to me, and I guess there isn't anybody who *wants* to belong to me—except—Uncle Jerimy."

"Oh, yes, there is, Joan. Why, dear——"

"Not really and truly?" She warmed eagerly.

"Really and truly!"

Pulses were hammering violently at Philip's temples. Into his heart had rushed a flood of passion that blotted out the menacing past, together with all thought of law and all power of reasoning. Taking a step toward her, he stretched out his starved, eager arms.

"Joan!"

"Yes?"

"I—I want you!" Already his fingers were locking

together behind her, his arms drawing her almost roughly to him.

"You—*want* me, Phil! You're not—not just—being sorry for me?"

Joan searched his face anxiously, and as she looked something seemed to die in the eyes that met hers. It was as if his soul had been peering out at her through crystal-clear windows, and he had suddenly drawn down the blinds.

"Why, Joie, of course I want you!" His hands came back to the safety of his pockets, his shoulders straightened. "We all want you!"

Then without warning his heart again took command and he caught up one of her hands and pressed his lips to it in a fever of passion.

"My little Joie! My little Joie!"

Joan caught her breath sharply; then she put up her free hand and laying it against his breast, pushed him gently from her. She couldn't bear that he should be sorry for her—as—as if she were a child with—with a stubbed toe! She laughed uncertainly, hysterically.

"Phil, don't ask me to marry you, dear, because you see, I—I don't know anything about you, and—and I guess a woman ought to know 'most everything about the man she marries. So—so don't ask me, will you, Phil?"

She pursed her lips at him saucily, but the small round chin quivered treacherously.

"I guess I ought to—to marry Longshanks. (He still asks me every day, you know). There's never been any mystery about Longshanks. I know all about him. Everybody does. I know how many times he had croup

when he was little, and—and what foods he finds indigestible now. I know how old he was when first he went up into the rigging, and when first he worked the traps, and I know exactly how many times he's fallen to the net.

"I reckon after all, it's pretty comfortable to know all about the man you marry. And I love being comfortable, Phil. I—I reckon being *comfortable* is next to—to being *good*. I——

"Oh, there's Uncle Jerry headed this way! He'll scold like—like anything if he finds I'm not in bed, and I—I guess I'd *cry* if anybody scolded me right now!"

She raised her flushed, hot little face to Philip, and her lips begged mutely.

"Good night, Phil." Her tone was irresistably appealing.

Resolutely Philip turned away from the trembling, cherry mouth.

"Good night, Joan," he said. Then swiftly and without looking back, he strode across the cinders to the line of cars beyond.

CHAPTER VIII

FATE GRINS AT PHILIP

ALL that night or what there remained of it, after she had at last reached her sleeping compartment in a long steel car at the rear of the squat brick railway station, Joan lay motionless in her berth, staring wide-eyed into the black world which whizzed past her window. Cinders beat in through the fine mesh screen that was fitted into the casement, but Joan was oblivious to them. The riot of emotions that had buffeted her about all day were running their gamut again, nor could the somnolent clickety-click of the wheels beneath her state-room or the soporific chugging of the engine that far up ahead was calling out its curfew to her still their violence.

Always she had wanted her mother, and scarcely had she given thought to her father. But to-day fathers—*legal* fathers—had assumed new and hideous proportions. To-day she had learned that to be a member of a circus was to be as a leper to the rest of the world. She had learned that Trixie loved Philip Dorset. She had learned that Philip—her dear, wonderful elerphunt man—did not want her! She had offered herself to him, and he had—*not wanted* her!

Philip had not wanted her!

Again and again she whispered that to herself as she lay there gazing with hot, dry eyes into the night. Again and again she said it as though trying to fix it in her aching heart. Long minutes dragged themselves wearily into hours. And still Joan stared tensely into the dark chaos beyond her window.

And then the world that flew past her grew less black. Objects began pushing themselves uncertainly into the blurred foreground that was no longer dense. At first these objects were formless and shadowy as they flitted transiently before the wide eyes of the girl who lay wondering there behind the copper screen; but gradually they became less obscure, less a part of the night. They shaped themselves into occasional houses, barns, outbuildings, windmills, haystacks and an almost unbroken line of fences. They were transient, flitting ghosts. Their outlines were wavering and indistinct. They moved into view and out again like weird, intangible forebodings.

Trees came and went, tall and dark and stiffly straight. Telegraph poles marched past monotonously, endlessly, like hurrying soldiers. Bare spaces stretched between the infrequent houses. For a long time those spaces still fitted into the night; then they, too, assumed individuality. They became grazing lands, meadows, fields, gardens, hills and hollows. Off on their horizon, which had separated from the night and resolved itself into an irregular, bluish line of hill crests, a delicate pink stained the sky.

It was dawn! The dawn of another day!

There came the clanging of the locomotive bell, the long-drawn crossing whistle, the straggling outskirts of a city and then the sharp grinding of brakes.

Drowsily Joan stared through the window. It was St. Joseph. Dreamily, disinterestedly, she recognized the town. It was here that Philip and she had gone swimming in a pretty, pond-lily-edged lake. And Philip had——

Again there came the imperative ringing of a bell, and again the mad shriek of a whistle.

"Philip doesn't want you!" screamed the whistle derisively.

"Philip doesn't want you! Philip doesn't want you!" came fainter and fainter the rumble of the wheels.

The tired eyes fluttered shut.

Philip—her Philip hadn't *wanted* her!

Her lips parted, pressed together, parted again.

She moved her head until one cheek rested against the hot pillow.

Her mother hadn't wanted her either! Her mother—and now—now Philip! Nobody had wanted her; nobody except Jeremy—her darling old Jeremy.

Well, Jeremy was—*young*. He'd get over it, if—if no tombstones got on his horizon. And if cinnamon bears were mongrels, the butcher's wife shouldn't knit any more spangles for them. And Philip——

There was a soft sigh and the clenched hands relaxed.

When she awoke it was broad daylight and somebody was touching her tear-stained cheek. She raised her head from the pillow suddenly and propping herself on one bare pink elbow drew the sheets up to her shoulders, blinking sleepily at the face bending above her.

"Paddy unlocked your door for me," Medea smiled down at her, "and he said you had been up pretty late."

(Paddy was an ex-clown. Having outlived the nimbleness which is one of a clown's requisites, and reached an age where rheumatism outstripped his humor, Paddy had become a porter—not just an ordinary porter, understand, who juggles the sheets of one of the many berth sleeping cars; but the *maitre de chambre* of the long steel "Pullman" in which were the compartments of his adored Miss Joan, Blake, Medea Tabet and Lawson and his wife).

"Did you sleep well, dear? You look tired, and there's no pink in your cheeks."

At the words a dull sense of awakening pain came upon Joan and instantly yesterday's troubles engulfed her.

She threw back the sheets and sprang lightly to the velvet-carpeted floor. As she dressed she told Medea about a new stunt which she and Ted had been practising, and about the unfairness of not being permitted to ride in pageants, and then about her head which she reckoned was aching worse than any other head had ever ached. Did it look perfectly natural? Wasn't it swollen or lopsided or anything?

She reckoned she hadn't slept very well last night. And she had cried, too. No, not about anything in particular. Just cried because—just because she'd got sort of lonesome and—and sorry for herself. Oh, there hadn't been any reason for the lonesomeness! But the car had stood in an awful froggy place behind that depot before it had pulled out of yesterday's town, and the croaking of frogs would make anybody sorry for himself. Didn't Medea ever get lonesome and homesick for something, when crickets got under her window and sang? Didn't she

feel just as if everybody on earth but her had died, and as if she had been left all alone to welcome St. Peter when he came with his horn; or was it Gabriel? And hadn't Medea ever noticed what pessimists frogs were? And how easily they could croak optimism right out of you?

Well, that was why she had cried. It had been the crickets and the frogs. And it was hateful and unsatisfying to cry when you were lying down. Tears always ran into your ears, and there was something aggravating and nasty about puddles of water in your ears. Then, too, when you cried at night your cry was lonelier and sadder, because there was nobody to say he was sorry. Where *was* that little gold pin? Funny how things hid themselves sometimes! And her hair—did it look all right?

And now she was starved. She hadn't dreamed it was so late. The parade would be lining up when they reached the lot. They'd have breakfast together, she and Medea, and—— What town was this? St. Joseph? Oh, yes, she had forgotten. She wondered if they would have time to take a peek at the Missouri River before lunch. Did Medea recall their ride last year in an excursion boat on the "Big Muddy?" She wondered if Philip would remember. Did men forget things like that more quickly than women? She wondered if to-day would be as warm as yesterday; and if they would have good houses. She hoped the old Big Top would be packed from the ground to the very top of its sidewalls. She loved riding her Ted when there was a perfect sea of humanity all around her. Poor Ted! She hadn't gone into the horse tent to

tell him good night. He must have been terribly hurt. She'd take him two lumps of sugar this morning when she left the cook-house, even if the "vet" *did* insist that sugar was bad for his teeth.

And thus, chattering like a magpie, Joan quit the car with her friend's arm drawn close within her own.

Small groups of men and boys were scattered about staring at the drawn curtains of the sleepers. Hastily dressed women (the haste of the dressing all too obvious in some instances) were making their way from ends of the various cars, and hurrying away down the cinder path that lay between the tracks to the street a few hundred feet to the west. From the cars of another section of the train, farther down the track, came hurrying men, fastening their collars as they came with fingers that fumbled stiffly, and gazing indifferently through the curious groups of townsmen with eyes that were still sleep-fogged.

Flamboyant posters of the circus faced the cars from vacant lots and the backs of buildings. An excursion train puffed past and came to a grinding stop under the sheds of the big depot. It belched out clouds of warm, eager country folk and villagers, who ran this way and that, collecting together their various belongings—husbands, wives, children, lunch baskets and imitation leather suitcases—and then shoved and pushed each other good-naturedly through the wide iron gates, gazing excitedly, happily about them.

For one moment Joan paused and looked round at the scene, the old familiar scene which for long, long years had been a part of her summer morning awakenings.

And she marveled that she could have looked at it so often without having seen it as it really was. She wondered that she never before had seen the romance, the fascinating charm of it all. Was it that she had not been observing? Or was it due to that quirk in human nature which makes us blind to the virtues of our familiar habitat, while it turns our eyes enviously upon that of our neighbor? She did not know. Life was getting queerly muddled. Things were going topsy-turvy. To-day, when she looked with unprecedented interest at this old familiar scene, expecting to find sordidness, she found in it unlooked for romance.

This morning the hustle and bustle in the air impressed Joan as though she had never before sensed it. She was seeing this scene from both its angles—the hurrying and scurrying of those who had come to see the circus, and the hurrying and worrying of those of the circus who had come to be seen. It was the combination of audience and actors that electrified the morning air for Joan. Yet yesterday, as she stood alone in the padroom, spangles and paint had looked oddly sordid.

Like a discoverer, she seemed to be looking upon a new world.

At the lot she and Medea found the cook-house up and doing business, just as it had been the day before in that other town, and the town before that. They breakfasted together rather silently, and Medea noted how little Joan ate for a girl who had claimed to be "starved." After breakfast there began another sickeningly hot day. And, although Medea tried to persuade her to go back to the car and rest until time to dress for the afternoon show,

Joan remained on the lot, skipping about in the sweltering sun minus even a sunshade or her wide straw hat.

She whistled shrilly, boyishly. She hummed little snatches of rollicking songs. She danced over the cinders, regardless of the disaster which they wrought to her ridiculously small white canvas shoes. She raced with a small Chinese boy round the great sawdust hippodrome, while in the somber, empty Big Top various acts were being rehearsed before the bored, uninterested rows of bare blue wooden seats. She ordered a groom to bring out her horse. Then she and Ted invented new hair-raising stunts, and she somersaulted, danced, pirouetted, and vaulted from ground to ground over his shining back, despite the fact that Jerimy, near by, urged her to be less reckless when "rehearsing in fluffy petticoats." A rubber band held the skirts about her slim ankles when she was not dancing, and as for the conventional clothing of the street, it seemed to hamper her not at all. Even Lawson, who ventured into the unlighted Big Top in time to squint his fat eye-lids at her just as—poised for an instant on Ted's smooth back—she made a swift, clean dive through a paper-covered hoop which a groom at the edge of the ring held up for her, turned to Blake with:

"Did you get a slant at that? Some nifty little kid! She can knock the spots off any kinker that ever had a lung full of ozone. She's a sure-enough child of the sawdust. It's a cinch that a girl who can do those stunts with all those fol-de-rol ruffles and fripperies on her, like handcuffs and shackles, is worth slathers of money to the Greatest on Earth."

Blake smiled. The corners of his small, dark mustache lifted, and he raised a well-manicured hand and stroked it tenderly.

"She can queen it over the others, all right," he agreed, never taking his eyes from the slender, white-frosted girl on the swiftly running horse.

"*Queen* it over them!" Lawson's emphasis took the form of an explosion. "What's a queen, that any old ace can beat? I tell you, Blake, that Kennerly girl is a flush, a full house and four aces, and I guess you've got to go some to win a jack pot against that! You've got to put on *some* speed, believe me!"

Philip looked on at her from a friendly shadow near the wide doors leading into the menagerie, where were his herd of feeding elephants, and trembled with fear for her safety. Her daring and reckless abandon sent beads of moisture out upon his brow, and a chill into his veins.

She slapped Ted's black, glistening neck with gay camaraderie. She caught Jeremy as she left the ring and hugged him fiercely. Outside, in the lot, she jumped over guy lines for the mere sake of jumping. She romped through the menagerie, which was a sort of huge vestibule or ante-room of the arena, feeding peanuts to the begging elephants, the monkeys and the tropical birds, poking a teasing finger perilously near to the sniffing noses of lions, tigers and leopards that gazed at her moodily through iron bars. She disobeyed Philip impudently when, following her about, he forbade her to thrust her hand into the cages of these wild beasts; and the only wonder was that nothing came of her defiance.

All day she flitted round Philip without quite touching him, like a moth attracted by the flame yet too wise to go too near, or like a tantalizing butterfly that circles about one without ever coming quite within reach of one's eager fingers.

Philip watched her with tired, weary eyes, under which tiny lines had gathered and criss-crossed in the blue shadows that had formed there during the night. An aching void was in his heart. He had come to the parting of the ways. He had asked Lawson that morning to send for another man to take his place. And, at Lawson's quick look of panic, he had suggested that his office be given to his head assistant, "Arkansas Dick," who (he told Lawson) understood the "bulls" quite as well as did he. And now—there remained to him only this last day! Just this one last day, and then—a void like that which already filled his heart.

If only he had lived his life differently—*it might have been!* (Ah! He was not the first to say that since it was said that summer day in Maud Muller's field. Nor would he be the last. How many there are who, regretting nothing now, will one day cry out: "It might have been! It might have been!")

How fate had laughed at him across the small shoulder of the little bronze idol! How it had grinned and mocked! And how desperately he had tried to hide this new suffering, this yearning for her that could come to naught!

The wounds, where corroding acids had eaten into his soul years ago, had broken through their falsely healed scars, and once more had become the gaping wounds of those other days; only now they seemed to have gone

deeper, eaten in farther, become more deadly insidious.

In those earlier days, when the tragedy of his youth had fallen upon him like the sword of Damocles, he had needed nothing so much as a hiding place. The circus had offered that. It was a floating city, a magically moving haystack where a needle could be easily lost. And he had gone to it in his hour of need and had left his past at the doors of its sheltering, nomadic white tents.

In the crucible of the circus he had cast his bitterness, his broken belief in the Deity, his disillusionments, his cynicism. Then the Alchemist, Love, had come and had breathed a sweet breath into the crucible; and the base metals of his soul had been transmuted, purified, made clean again. And he, fool that he was, had been happy in the golden result, with scarcely a thought for the accounting which, some day, the Alchemist was sure to demand.

He had even forgotten the sordid things which had been transmuted into gold. He had lived in a fool's paradise. Then quite suddenly he had begun to fear the power of the Alchemist, to live in a dread of the demand for payment—payment for services rendered.

He had even contemplated escape. He could go away. And he had known that he *ought* to go away. For in the pockets of his life there was no coin which the Alchemist would recognize. His life was bankrupt. He should go. He had long known that. Yet, knowing it, he had tarried, had delayed too long! Now his heart ached as he watched her.

She flitted here and there like a careless, action-loving butterfly, always on the wing. She flirted outrageously—

albeit unconsciously—with poor, joy-stricken Longshanks. She smiled—innocently alluring—into Blake's boldly admiring eyes. She even coquetted with fat old Lawson, the manager, and with emaciated old Spinks, the clown.

An aura of witchery and recklessness hung about her. Philip felt the power of it, tortured himself with watching it, while a blind jealousy rose from it and took form in his bitter heart.

She should have belonged to him! By all the rights of man she was *his*. For one mad moment as he looked at her when she tossed a tennis ball for Longshanks' poised racket, he felt an almost overwhelming impulse to snatch her up in his arms and to carry her off with him; to take her away to some secluded place where he would dare to live without fear of the past finding him out; there to live alone with her—alone—without the necessity of sharing her. Then came the arguments of justice.

What had he to offer her? Could he drag her into a shameful exile? Could he allow a law defied to wreak its vengeance upon her! Besides—had he any right to take too seriously her statement that she loved him? Or had she ever really made that statement? Had that hour last night, when she had naïvely offered her sweet self to him, ever really been? Or had he labored under a tormenting delusion? If that hour had been *real*, then where was that Joan to-day; the Joan who had laid her wistful young heart at his feet, the Joan who had smiled up at him through a mist of tears, and upon whom he had sorrowfully turned his back when, striding away in

an agony of regret, he had left her standing there alone in the night? Where was that Joan, if she had ever really been?

The Joan of to-day was bubbling with life and youth. She was more dangerously possessed of witchery than ever he had seen her. She had that insidious charm, that compelling sorcery, that siren magnetism that is all the more dangerous in a woman whose inexperienced youth, whose innocence and lack of sophistication make her childishly unaware of her power.

Philip looked at her sadly. She was so buoyant, so joyously effervescent! Not a sign remained of last night's tears, not a vestige of last night's wistfulness! Radiant, seductive, alluring, she tormented him with her gay abandon.

She did not avoid him. She did not even try to escape him when she saw that a meeting was imminent. But it was not the frank, sweet smile of the Joan Kennerly of other days that greeted him. She looked at him with tantalizing insouciance, and her smile lacked its old, cherished quality of intimacy.

Toward evening, she seemed to sense something of his suffering, and her gay spirits drooped. She sent her fluttering moths about their various businesses, and wandered aimlessly about the lot like a lonely wraith of the butterfly she had been.

CHAPTER IX

WORMWOOD

BUT it isn't fair!" she argued with Lawson as she sat on the tongue of a red and gold wagon in the late afternoon sun. "It isn't fair!"

Lawson had come up to her a moment before, smiling benignly and blissfully unconscious of the argumentative mood he was bumping into, and Joan had flung herself into a heated defense of Bud Snyder.

"What isn't fair?" he parried, pushing his hat farther back on his head and making a lazy, half-hearted effort to intimidate his aggressive little cross-examiner.

"To refuse to keep him on at something!" Joan persisted, as she kicked a patent leather toe into the thick yellow dust.

"Why, he ain't been babying around you, has he?"

"Babying!" Joan tossed her small head angrily. "Is it babying to love somebody so much that—that you just want to be near them?"

"But Trix don't want him, and anyway"—Lawson looked down at her with a return of his indulgent smile—"what have you got to do with it all, Joie?"

"That's just what I'd like to know, Mr. Lawson!" Trixie Snyder had come up quietly and, pausing beside Lawson, she, too, smiled down at Joan; only her smile

was not indulgent. "Everybody's heard about her and Bud meeting outside the lot, and I think you ought to advise her—tell her to be more cautious about meeting men who have not yet been properly divorced from their wives."

Joan looked up at her for an instant in puzzled wonder; then of a sudden her topaz eyes narrowed and the rose-petal pink disappeared from the soft, round cheeks.

"I—reckon you're right, Mr. Lawson." She looked past the other woman's face to the purpling face of the man. "The farther away Bud Snyder is from—*mongrels*, the better it will be for him." She sprang to her feet with swift, agile grace, and putting out her hand touched one of Lawson's pudgy arms. "Love must be a kind of a clown, don't you think so? It—it's so terribly *funny*!"

"Run along, Joie. I want to say a few words with our friend here. Run along, like a good little girl!" Lawson pressed the fingers on his arm with awkward tenderness.

"But it is funny, isn't it?" Joan insisted, lifting her colorless little face to his.

"Funny when it's got anything to do with brazen young women and cast-off husbands!" Trixie patted her blond hair languidly. "And when it's got something to do with mysterious men of the world and *circus* girls, why, it's a scream!"

"Say! What's the matter with you!" Lawson turned upon her with eyes blazing and nostrils dilating. "What's eating you, anyway? Trying to get yourself in Dutch around here by picking on Joan Kennerly? Better cut it, young woman, and cut it quick, before you're outside the ropes with your cast-off Bud! Get me?"

For almost a full minute Trixie Snyder stared insolently back into the blazing, heavily lidded eyes; then, with a shrug of her shoulders and a toss of her superbly coiffed head, she turned leisurely toward the dressing-tent.

"I guess Bud wasn't far wrong," mused the manager of the F. & W. a little later as he stood alone beside the red and gold parade wagon. "I guess there's lots of things safer than cats!"

At dinner Philip found a note beneath the plate of his small corner table. His long, sinewy fingers trembled as they picked it up. Then he gazed at it a long time without unfolding it. His waiter touched his arm twice before he became aware that he had not given his order. And without glancing at the proffered menu card, he ordered his meal mechanically.

Then frowningly he unfolded the paper!

There was nothing about that square of paper which could have served to identify its writer. But Philip had found notes beneath his plate before; gay little poems, sad little poems, and, sometimes, deliciously naïve epigrams or bits of quaint philosophy. And though the scraps of paper differed in size and quality, they were always the same in the manner of their folding. Their creases were carelessly pressed, their corners never together, their edges always uneven. It was this boyish carelessness which was one of Joan's best-known characteristics, and it had signed her scraps of paper with an undeniable signature.

Philip folded the note again without having read it. He was trembling like a woman; he, who had faced wild

beasts in their jungle with never the bat of an eyelash. His fogged eyes had blurred the chirography of the opened page. He was getting weak. He was yielding to this physical pain at last; now, when he was on the eve of going away from the contact which hurt. He had sat in the cab of a locomotive last night, when he had not dared face the pain alone in his berth. He had felt the engine throbbing and swaying beneath him like a great breathing, living thing, as it swung through the dark of the night and the still gray of the dawn, and he had kept his aching body under control; had even wondered that his hands did not tremble when he lighted the cigarette which the voluble engineer had given him. Last night when the soul of him was raw and bleeding he had done that, had controlled his body. To-night he felt wretchedly weak and unreliable.

He would not read the note until he had eaten, or at least had made a feint at eating. He would wait until this womanish fit of vertigo had passed. *He*—trembling! He clenched his hands determinedly.

His was not a combative nature; yet the fact that fate should have cast the remnant of his ruined life into a vortex of new suffering filled his being with a savage fury and left him quivering with resentment against his own impotency.

The masterful, cool gray eyes that had held the attention of beasts while he trained them to do his bidding were suddenly hot as living coals, and tiny streaks of blood began to show on the unsullied whites of them, and the pigments of the irises appeared to have become concentrated and darker. Veins stood out like cords upon

his temples and on the backs of his tightly folded hands. A moisture shone upon his forehead. The square jaws were set until they stood out where the muscles of the tanned cheeks were drawn tautly away from them, and the bluish lips marked a rigid line beneath the sensitive nostrils of the straight nose.

There was an insistent pain at the base of his brain, and his mind groped at things dully, stupidly, sluggishly. When his waiter had served him, he compelled himself, with a sort of savage delight, to eat of the tasteless foods that choked him. His face darkened with the rush of hot blood, paled, darkened again. His fork clattered against his plate. The glass which he raised to his lips was empty, yet he drank from it thirstily. A lock of his dark hair fell down upon his forehead and clung there damply. He pushed it back with an oath. The coffee was scalding hot, yet he put the cup to his lips and emptied it before he set it down.

With deliberate slowness he took a gold match safe from his pocket, struck a match and lighted a cigar. He reveled with a kind of savage satisfaction at his own torture of himself. He even laughed harshly as the fingers of one hand reached eagerly out for that folded bit of paper, while the other hand pushed it farther from him. He ordered two whiskeys, and when they had come quaffed them in two gulps. And all the time one thought kept repeating itself in his aching brain, reiterating doggedly. It was the thought of his own folly—the folly which had led him into this aching tragedy. He should have gone away weeks, months ago, when first he had sensed the danger, when first the knowledge of

the exact quality of his love for Joan Kennerly had come to him. And he had stayed on, quarantined with, and daily encouraging, the bacillus that was to eat its way through his happiness. He had remained when he had known the danger. Now, by God, let him suffer! Let him drain his cup of tragedy to its bitter dregs. It was fit pay for his folly. And he had never shrunk from paying for the blood-sucking, parasitic follies which had robbed him all his life. Oh, yes! He would pay!

He laughed again, sharply, gratingly. Then he picked up the folded paper and stared at it with his hot, blood-shot eyes for a long moment, his broad shoulders hunched forward, the gray flannel of his sack coat wrinkling where his long body sank together or lurched heavily over the table, his handsome face tense and strangely drawn. Then he unfolded and read it:

"I'm ashamed!
I'm just filled up with shame—
And, Philip, if you came
And gently took my hand,
(In books they do that) and
Began to scold,
Why, I'd grow old—
As old as it is necessary
For those to be who want to marry.
To-day I've had a horrid time—
And now—I'm just—that *one first line!*

"I'm ashamed!
All day I've been so bad!

But, Phil, I wasn't mad.
I just hurt deep somewhere—
But maybe you don't care
To have me tell
About *that*—well,
I wasn't really merrier,
But just a bit contrarier,
I had to laugh or else I'd *whine*;
That's why I'm full of that first line.

"I'm ashamed!
Do you forgive me, Phil?
I'm praying that you will.
Oh, Philip, I'm so sad—
I've been so very bad!
Please, Philip, won't you say
That you'll forget to-day?
And then I'll try to grow old fast,
(It won't take long, if the shame will last.)
Oh, Phil, I'm sorrier than this rhyme—
And I can't eat *for that first line!*"

CHAPTER X

VENUS, COMFORTER

THROUGH the long hours of another night Joan stared out into the ink of the "railroad yards." The F. & W. were to remain over an idle Sunday in St. Joseph to give their remaining two performances, as advertised, on Monday. Joan had always loved those idle Sundays. They had been long play days for her and Philip; that is, all those Sundays when Joan happened to be free from the restraint of any of her regularly acquired religions. Joan was as impressionable as wax where creeds were concerned, and coming into daily contact as she did with the exponents of many and varied faiths, she had absorbed to-day all that appealed to her intelligence of one creed, and to-morrow all that had appealed to it of another. And Philip Dorset and Jerimy had been dragged willy-nilly into the sacred precincts of many houses of worship, whose doctrines were often widely divergent. And while Joan gazed with worshiping eyes at whatever manner of pulpit happened to be in front of them, Philip gazed with worshiping eyes at the lovely profile that silhouetted itself against a stained-glass window or against the somber garments of a neighbor; and Jerimy, poor, tyrannized Jerimy, gazed inwardly (heavy, sandy-fringed eyelids closed) at a small stubbed toe

lifted for the healing touch of his lips, or a golden-haired baby who had wonderful ancestral estates somewhere in a benighted country where detectives couldn't find them.

But there were days when creeds slumped a little. And when one of those days happened to be a Sunday, Joan engineered gay little picnics into a wood where a crowd of circus folk would "nymph" as she called it.

Thus had passed many laughter-ringing Sundays, Sundays which few of that good-natured, big-hearted crowd would ever forget; Sundays when they had gone off picnicking like the most domesticated of families. But this latest Sunday was doomed to be anything but joyous.

A distant block-signal raised and lowered its arms in a halo of dim light that came from a hazy electric globe near by. Joan stared at its gyrations apathetically. Here and there in the chaotic black of a cloudy night a red light showed like an evil eye; and an occasional green one winked at her insolently as though she shared with it some guilty secret. Sometimes these eyes blinked out suddenly, and she would hear the rumbling of wheels, the creaking of rails and the sharp ringing of a bell. Then the sounds would grow fainter, die away altogether, and once more the silence of the night would envelop her, and the red and the green eyes stare at her.

Then came morning; a wet, drab morning, sticky, close, oppressive! Rain beat weakly against her window panes, with an occasional moment of increased energy and deluging fury. Dimly through the veil of it Joan saw men going here and there over the tracks or down the cinder paths between the shining rails. Most of them wore black rubber coats that slapped heavily

against their legs as they walked. But there were a few who were less protected, and these unfortunate ones seemed as abject as the weather. They slunk along, the collars of their shabby coats turned up to keep the rain from their necks, their heads lowered, their bodies leaning into the wind that beat upon them, the shoes on their feet wet and soggy, and sometimes with soles that flapped with each shambling step. Some of these latter carried dinner-pails from which the rain dripped dismally, but not a few looked as though the meager contents of a dinner-pail might have saved them from starving. These few were even shabbier than the others; and most of them glanced furtively from side to side like hunted things, and slipped stealthily along in the lee of a row of freight cars, lynx eyes watching for an open door, lank bodies pressed close to the inhospitable, high board sides of the dripping box-cars.

Joan watched them in dull apathy. At another time she would have rung for Paddy and ordered him to find some sort of shelter for those slinking, rain-soaked wanderers. And Paddy would have been ordered to find them some breakfast out of the oblong slip of green paper pressed slyly into his hand. But this morning Joan saw only her own misery, and the dreariness of the day seemed to symbolize it.

Dawn had found her asleep, but she had soon awakened and for a long time now she had lain there, face turned toward the window (which she had closed during the night when the rain had first begun to fall), one bare arm thrown out across the pillow and her head resting upon it, her eyes dry as arid deserts.

Now and again she raised herself on an elbow and gazed through the winding rivulets on her window pane at the signs of life that had sprung into existence with the rainy dawn; gazed at the wraiths moving through the rain, at the distant block-signal that had lifted its arms to her in the night, at the tiny threads of water which trickled through the cinder paths between the many tracks, to the swollen streams that were miniature, turbulent rivers in the gutter-like depressions below, just at the edge of the wooden ties. But she saw none of these dreary things, although again and again she sighed and swallowed convulsively.

Suddenly she became cognizant of the storm and its attendant gloom, and she clenched one small hand and shook her fist at it.

"Do you think I care how you drizzle, you nasty old weather? Don't you know I love to wade in cold little puddles? And don't Philip and I read wonderful Greek things on rainy days, or philosophical thing-a-ma-jigs? And don't we love to read and listen between times to the rain beating on the paraffined top of his tent that never lets in one single drop? Well, then, you ought to know *I* don't care how you rain."

She flattened her little nose against the window pane and crinkled her eyes at the dull, cheerless day. Then, scampering out of bed, she flew at her toilet, whistling boisterously. There was a rattling of bottles, the splashing of water, the banging of a hair brush into the walls that were so close upon each other, and the swishing of crisp, fresh linens.

She came out at last, a vision of loveliness in a girlish

frock of brown, plaid gingham, slim waist belted with a wide velvet ribbon of the same color, starched skirt rippling about her slender, silken ankles, low, sturdy, little russet shoes on her small feet, a coil of bronze hair at the nape of her neck (recently she had taken to coiling her hair whenever she happened to be a bit out of humor with Philip or Jeremy, because each of these adorers loved the tawny braid of the Joan who was still a girl, and each disliked the bronze coil of the Joan-woman of whom they were more than half shy), and altogether looking like a red-brown Titian that might have just stepped down from a crowded wall of the Uffizzi gallery in Florence, or like a flaming, golden-brown autumn come suddenly to life under the persuasion of a summer rain, having taken upon itself the face and figure of a goddess.

With the perversity that was one of her fascinating charms, Joan wore sackcloth and ashes on Sunday, and frivolous little flouncy things on week days. On a Sunday when all the world dressed in its very best, Joan wore her simplest frocks. The world's gingham days were Joan's silk days, and the world's one silk day was Joan's gingham day. It was just a queer twist of her nature that made her nostrils hunger for the wholesome scent of freshly laundered gingham on those days through which sounded the squeak of Sunday shoes and the rattle of the stale, dead product of silk worms.

At the lot Joan found the usual deserted, dejected-looking tents that were part and parcel of a rainy Sunday on the road. Nearly everybody appeared to sleep all day on such a Sunday. And those who did venture out of the

cars and come up to the lot either hurried back again to the sleepers or congregated in the dressing rooms for card games on the men's side of the canvas wall, and for desultory gossip and half-hearted sewing and mending on the side that was the women's.

Joan sprang from the taxicab that had driven her hence, and stood for an instant looking at the Big Top's desolate entrance, where last night had been a heaving mass of humanity striving for admittance, fighting, shoving, pushing—ruthlessly, recklessly. To-day it was but a trampled spot, a nauseating mixture of yellow Missouri clay and wet sawdust. Last night on the platforms in front of those side-show tents flanking the passageway from the street to the main entrance of the menagerie and arena, "spielers" had pointed at the monsters painted on the huge canvas banners above their heads, and had described with marvelous imagination and powers of exaggeration the "AWFUL, TER-R-RIBLE, ONLY ONE OF ITS KIND"; and yelled like things possessed at any show of indifference on the part of those brave enough, or wise enough, to pass on when the *free* exhibition was over and the hoarse barker was left alone on the small platform. Last night hawkers had made a pandemonium of the place. They had shrieked out their wares with an equal lack of consideration for ear-drums, whether those wares were "three balls for five cents, hit the nigger's head and get a cigar," or "double-jointed, fresh roasted peanuts, guaranteed to stop your mother-in-law's tongue, cure the blues and add a dollar's worth of fun to the Big Show, and all for the insignifercant sum of a jitney," or "lemernade! Ice cold lemernade, made in the shade,

stirred with a spade, to be drunk by a maid; five cents! Wet your whistle! Treat your lady fren'! Right here, lemernade a nickle a glass."

Last night a crowd of early arrivals had stood in front of that platform over there at the right of the entrance, and had buzzed like a swarm of bees while a snake charmer had smiled benignly down at them, supremely indifferent to the huge crawling thing that undulated over her, thrusting out its forked tongue at the awed, upturned faces.

Last night there had been all these noises and many more, such as laughter, chatter, the screaming and crying of children, the popping of soda bottles, the clanging of street cars in a hurry to get back uptown for more cargoes, the honking of automobiles, the blaring of bands.

Last night the dressing tent had been a haven of quiet compared with this part of the lot.

Last night the place had rivaled Dante's Inferno.

To-day it was silent and barren as the grave of a forgotten man. And only the sullen rain broke the stillness, pattering upon paraffined canvas with its funereal music, its tearful dirge, infrequently punctuated with a Wagnerian rumble from the low-hanging sky.

Joan gathered her skirts about her and wrinkling her nose disdainfully at the drear spot where had been last night's seething bedlam, went swiftly off toward the left where Philip Dorset's small private tent faced the menagerie.

At the door she stopped abruptly. Blake was at the point of egress. His hand was touching the looped-up flap.

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"Gone!" Blake leaned triumphantly toward her. "But nobody knows where."

"Where's Philip?" She peered past him as she spoke.

The tent had no other occupant, and there was something strange and unfamiliar, something weirdly empty about its interior.

Joan's brow puckered and a premonition of evil played around her heart, like a seismographic current registering the disemboweling of all her hopes. She looked wonderingly into Blake's flat, dark eyes, and Blake smiled enigmatically.

"Won't you come in?" he asked stepping to one side.

Joan passed into the tent with a nod of her head, her fascinated gaze riveted to the unprecedentedly empty table.

"It—it seems strange here!" She looked round at Blake with troubled eyes. "Where is Philip?"

"Gone!" Blake leaned triumphantly toward her.

"Gone!" One of Joan's hands flew to her throat. "Where? When?"

"Last night, but nobody knows *where*! Men who flee between two days usually have reasons for not advertising their destination. And this fine gentleman of yours—with his snobbish airs and his grand words——"

"Stop!" Joan's eyes blazed like yellow flames. "You—you—hyena!"

"It's the truth!" Blake flushed, though he bent still nearer to the girl who stood rigid before him. "Two nights ago he went to Lawson down at the cars and told him that he had to leave the show *at once*! He gave no reasons——"

"Why should he?" Joan heard her own voice wonderingly, but vaguely conscious of the words it said. "His

reasons didn't belong to the F. & W." Oh, it wasn't true! It couldn't be true!

"And he hurried away last night," Blake finished, ignoring the interruption.

"He had a—a right to go, if—if he wished!" Joan's head reared defiantly. But somewhere deep within her she was sobbing: "Philip is gone! Philip is *gone!*"

"You are delicious when you look like that!" Blake sat down on a corner of the table and gazed at her admiringly, plucking at his closely cropped mustache and smoothing his glossy black hair.

"And you are—mean!" Joan looked at him scornfully. "I—I hate you!" She turned to go.

"Not really!" Blake flung himself from the table with the swift grace of a cat. He laughed easily as he followed her to the door. "You hate me because I happened to be the one to tell you about *him!* Oh, well! I can wait. You'll like me well enough yet. And once you are mine, young lady——"

But Joan had fled.

Blindly she made her way into the menagerie where were the great beasts *he* had loved; and there, with her cheek resting against the thick hide of a long, gently swaying elephant's trunk, she tried bravely to understand.

Philip Dorset had gone, and with no last word for her! Philip, her wonderful "elerphunt man," had gone; gone back to that world from which he had come; perhaps to some girl who played tennis and was afraid of elephants and *things*—some girl who thought circus people were mongrels, one who had a mother and a house with red geraniums and—and——

"No, he didn't, Venus! I—I'm a—a—Oh, Venus! *He's gone!* Our Philip is gone! And it's my fault, Venus! It's my fault! I—I asked him to marry me. Honest I did! And when he said I was too young, I was nasty to him. And maybe—maybe, Venus, that *was* his only reason for not wanting me right away. Maybe he's just gone away to—to wait until I am older. Do you reckon he has, Venus? Do you reckon he didn't mind my being, you know—what Trixie said I was? And do you reckon he'll come back after a while, next year, perhaps, or the year after that? I couldn't bear to wait many years, I——"

And so she had gone on with her valiant excuses for Philip, her savage self-arraignment, and her pathetic attempt to convince her numbed heart that Philip had gone away not because his past had called him, nor because he had wanted to get away from a circus girl who had boldly asked him to marry her, but because he had not wanted to be tempted while she, Joan, was yet too young.

But the sobbing within her did not cease, and its one refrain was: Philip is gone! Philip is *gone!*

She poured out her aching heart to Venus and because her confessor was an elephant instead of a priest, who shall say that her grief was the less relieved, the confessor less greatly moved. This huge beast loved her as it loved also the man of whom she talked. If its power of reasoning was limited—providing, of course, that it possessed one at all—why then should it not accept the reasons offered by this small, adored person for the master's sudden disappearance?

Years ago when Jerimy had first brought Joan into

the menagerie and had carried her down the line of elephants—not so many in numbers then—balancing her carefully on the guard rope in front of them, the monstrous animals—all except Venus—had whimpered with fear, true to their antipathy for all things small. Venus, much to the surprise of the trainers and keepers, reached out her trunk and catching the lace-edged little petticoats had tried to pull the cooing infant out of Jerimy's protecting arms. From that moment at the very beginning of their acquaintance, Venus had never feared Joan; always she had loved her.

Thus the keepers and old Dad Smith, the trainer, had marveled when Venus had shown instant friendliness, even a tenderness, for the infant charge of the head of the horse department, and Venus had kept them wondering. For every day she had demanded to see her little idol. Every day she tossed her hay about her angrily, trumpeted, growled, and fussed generally, until somebody brought the small Kennerly atom to see her. Immediately she was pacified and quite willing to be docile for another twenty-four hours, at the end of which time the performance would be repeated.

Once, at the time when Joan had a third birthday and the measles simultaneously, and Venus had trumpeted and fussed in vain, the beast had become infuriated, she had yanked up the stakes to which a foreleg and a hind leg were chained as though they were toothpicks stuck in dough, and had walked straight through the sidewall (not bothering to lift it with her dexterous trunk), carrying a part of it along with her. Outside, she had gazed about her speculatively, glancing first at one tent and

then at another. Then she had started at a lumbering trot toward the blacksmith tent, veering just before she had reached it and swinging off in the direction of the cook-house.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the cook-house was in ruins. All that remained of the place where several thousand people had eaten a well-cooked luncheon was a pile of *débris*—torn canvas, splintered benches, protruding table-legs, broken crockery, battered pans, shreds of damask table covers, and bare poles from which ragged streamers of canvas fluttered in the breeze.

They had captured her and "guyed her out"; and the next day, though Venus was chastened and less obstreperous, Dad Smith had asked Granny Wilson if a trip to the menagerie would hurt little Joan. And Granny Wilson had thought not. So Joan had visited her admiring friend, and Venus had almost gurgled with laughter. It is possible that old Dad Smith felt a wee bit guilty for having inflicted the punishment of the day before, and was offering reparation. For, to put it in his own bluff language (poor old Dad Smith!), "'Twasn't as if Venus was the only one that had gone plum daft about the little bronze idol! 'Twas only that she was honester and less ashamed about her love, and a devil of a lot less timid."

So that affinity which had always existed between Joan and this native of wild jungles drew them closer together now, when a common sorrow ached in their hearts.

For days after that rainy Sunday Joan came to the menagerie and whispered to Venus, until Venus began to wait expectantly, eagerly anticipating these cherished visits. Days when Joan could find comfort nowhere else

she found it here, or at least a semblance of it. Here was the one creature who had loved Philip Dorset as she had loved him. It was here she could pour out the grief and the sore disappointment of her heart; here that she could open the floodgates of her love and let it go forth in rushing torrents to her elephunt man, wherever he might be.

In the afternoon of that dreary Sunday in St. Joseph she went wandering aimlessly about the picturesque old city; climbing the hills down which tiny streams were running, growing as they ran with the fine misty, drizzling rain; standing on their crests and gazing out over the cloud-wrapped city to where the great Missouri River washed the clay banks at the foot of the main streets; eyeing pensively an old, ivy-covered convent, with its high walls, its steep terraces and its score of white tombstones at the rear; walking listlessly, with protection of neither umbrella nor rubbers, her little russet shoes clattering on the worn, wet sidewalks; watching the hurrying streams in the gutters and wondering idly why they made such haste to reach the ocean, when, after all, the ocean might not *want* them when they got there.

Once she stopped half way down a hill at the spot where Jesse James, the gay, debonaire young bandit, had lived and died; and she lifted her eyes questioningly to the trees that sheltered it, and to the old brick schoolhouse which flanked it on the west.

Then, hiring a taxi at last, she drove through the reeking, muggy dampness to Lover's Lane, the road which the City's beloved poet had made famous. Nestling down in a corner of the taxi, her small feet drawn up under

her, her slim body slumped into a little pile of brown gingham, she dreamed of Philip, and of how they had wandered together over these very same streets and roads when they were here during a past season.

She went sliding from corner to corner of the slippery seat, thumping into the cushioned ends when the car turned a corner on two wheels, and bouncing almost on to the floor when the chauffeur, blissfully unmindful of the "internal mechanism" of a car which did not belong to him, steered the thing over a curbstone or into a rut.

Then night came, and shunning even Medea, she dined alone with Jerimy in an uptown café. She refused to discuss the sudden disappearance of Philip Dorset, and fussed at Jerimy when he related to her how excited the lot had become the moment the news had spread over it.

"I don't care, Philip, if—you've killed a man!" she whispered into the dark when later she lay in the berth of her state-room. "If you have, Philip, then, maybe, my being—*spurious*—won't matter so much. But if—if there's a girl, elerphunt man—if there's a girl, then I hope you get caught and tried for—for *murder*!" Tears ran unheeded into her small ears. Then, fiercely: "No, I don't, Philip! Oh, no! I don't! I don't! I—I just want you, Phil, dear, and I don't care what you've done. Please, Philip, don't—stay away! Oh, Philip, don't—*don't stay away!*"

CHAPTER XI

THE RING MASTER SHOOTS A BOLT

TO JOAN KENNERLY life assumed a dull drab color in the blank weeks that followed Philip Dorset's departure from the city of Nomads. The sky was no longer lapis lazuli, the earth no longer emerald, the streams no longer shimmering crystal and silver.

Overhead was a faded, washed-out blue that was hazy with the film of Indian summer. The tents were pitched from day to day over carpets that grew steadily more scorched and yellow. The leaves of the trees that cast thinning shadows here and there about the lot grew russet in the cool breezes that came with the first days of October, turned crimson when the first frosts had touched them with hoary fingers, fluttered to the ground with whispering sighs on the wings of the first wintry winds, and lay in little shifting mounds which to Joan were unkempt graves of dead summer days. Gone were all the gay beauties of warmth and sunshine; the nodding wild flowers that had reared their heads above a billowing wheat field; the butterflies that had come forth in all their gorgeousness from last spring's chrysalides; the riot of color in the world's lovely plumage; the music that had played through all the day, from the first awakening note of the lark to the drowsy, somnolent buzz of a locust in the late afternoon.

The flowers had withered and drooped, dried and blown away like sweet-scented ashes of a sacred altar fire; the butterflies had folded their tired little wings and gone to sleep; the chirping of birds that broke the stillness of the frosty morning air was plaintive and sad; the locust had seen to the larva for another spring, and with characteristic somnolence had drowsed off into eternity; even the streams had forgotten their songs. They moaned drearily, sullenly, their silvery sheen tarnished to the dull opacity of lead.

The tents, the wandering village which she had always so loved, to Joan had become so many sepulchers where stalked the ghost of what had been Philip Dorset, and where echoed what once had been his voice. The herd of restless, grieving elephants were like titanic gray symbols of her own loneliness. The small marquee near the menagerie looked desolate as a haunted house, and no longer did its open door beckon to her. A stranger occupied it! A stranger managed the beasts her Philip had loved! And though an occasional lot was velvety brown, carpeted with gorgeously colored maple and oak leaves, to her each succeeding lot appeared more bleak, more drearily somber.

But she laughed and sang and whistled, and the laughter and songs and whistling deceived everybody except Jeremy—Jeremy, who loved her most. Jeremy followed her about on one or another transparent excuse, watching her furtively with his troubled old eyes, his shaggy eyebrows drawn down in his dear, disguising frown; reiterating gruff admonitions as to the care of her health; doing his loving, patient best to guard her

from this unseen thing, whatever it might be, that was hurting her; and day by day growing more sorely puzzled, more wretchedly perplexed.

Once Jerimy caught the glisten of tears in the mellow, golden eyes; another time he caught those eyes brooding—scintillatingly rebellious, and hard as glowing topaz. Then again and again he heard a sharp break in the voice that sang some gay song of the hour, or the abrupt ending, in the middle of a bar, of a warbling, bird-like whistle. He found her strangely subdued at times when something had occurred which ordinarily would have lighted the fuse of her ever-ready, passionate little temper. He found her capricious, impetuous and even petulant at other times, when the dull routine of the day had lulled the rest of the F. & W. into a state of peace by its uneventfulness. Though he tried to understand,

“There was a door to which he found no key,
There was a veil through which he might not see.”

He could only grope blindly for the reasons that eluded him, smoke a bit oftener, swear a little more fiercely, and whistle a trifle louder. The roustabouts who were unfortunate enough to incur his displeasure heard a vocabulary of profane words that surprised even their calloused ears. The grooms and stable men found him difficult and hard to please. He cursed the horses when they failed to obey him, and if surreptitiously he slipped them lumps of sugar, how was any one to know? His hair grew more grizzled, his eyes less keen, though the lowered brows disguised that fact by giving the impression that one was

being microscopically, mercilessly examined by beetling eyes that glowered from under ferocious bushes of wiry gray hair; and if the beetling eyes were merely the imaginary effect of the brows, if the faded blue orbs, with their bleary net-work of veins, had a far-away look in their filmy depths, how was one to know it when the illusion of that beetling scowl beneath the shaggy brows was so convincing, so disconcerting?

At first Jerimy had talked with Joan about a boarding school, had argued and commanded, had in turn been cross-questioned and defeated. Very firmly he had told her that it was his duty to send her away to school. Very firmly Joan had replied that it was her duty to remain with him. He had frowned. Joan had smiled. He had built up a fortress of arguments. Joan had bombarded it with caresses of wheedling fingers. He had talked, blustered. She had laughed and silenced.

The days and weeks and months flew by, and Jerimy's heart grew constantly heavier within him. Sometimes he would place a short, rough, square-tipped finger under his idol's chin and tilting her face until the light fell full upon it, would gaze deep into her eyes, while he made the hypocritical excuse that he believed she needed glasses. (As if eyes like hers could have imperfections!) And sometimes he would peer out from under his bushy brows at the circles or faint bluish shadows that lay beneath those gold-flecked orbs and shake his head mournfully.

Through the long winter months in New York City and the up-state quarters, Jerimy had wondered and ached. Through all the following spring he continued to

wonder and ache; and summer found him with his problem still unsolved.

Then came the day when Blake sought him out and gave him a key to the closed door; and though Blake had hoped for a result far different from the one which he attained, the fact remained that he had lifted the veil for the troubled Jeremy.

One afternoon early in November he had found Jeremy inspecting harness in an ante-room of the horse tent. The F. & W. had migrated to the southern lap which brought up the finish of the tenting season, and there was that restlessness in the air which always hovered over the lot when the tour was nearing its end. Women in the dressing-room were folding and packing away the bits of embroidery and needlework that had employed their domestic fingers during the few idle hours that stretched between parade return and afternoon shows, humming gaily, telling everybody how glad they were that the season was over, yet stealing wistful glances at each other whenever they thought themselves unobserved. The men, strolling about the lot rather aimlessly, clapped each other on the back, played ball in a perfunctory, half-hearted fashion, smoked innumerable cigarettes, pipes and cigars, lied noisily about how glad they would be to get "off the road," grew shamefaced when a look of regret was discovered in their eyes, and smiled rather crookedly when they talked of meeting again next season.

The matinee had just come to an end, and Jeremy was rubbing tentative fingers along the oiled leather of odd pieces of harness fresh from the hands of the harness cleaners, pausing now and then to inspect more closely

the bits of polished brass and silver that reflected the light like mirrors. He was whistling his one threadbare tune, and his heavy brows made a straight, ragged hedge across the lower part of his deeply creased forehead. His corduroy trousers were streaked with oil; his blue madras shirt was collarless and open at the ruddy throat, so finely criss-crossed with tiny lines, and the sleeves were rolled up, showing the strong, muscular forearms. The grizzled hair bristled in all directions from the rather large head. The broad, square hands moved through the maze of harness with nervous energy.

Sidney Blake paused inside the door and gazed at the man for a moment in silence, his own hands twitching where they were hidden in the pockets of his dark sack coat. Then he approached Jerimy with a cigar out-held and a remark about the weather.

Jerimy glanced at the cigar suspiciously, took it gingerly between short thumb and index finger and lifted it to a scornful nose that sniffed at it contemptuously.

"Thanks," he said laconically, handing back the offering. "Thanks just the same, Blake, but I outgrew them kind of ladylike cheroots when I was knee-high to a grasshopper. I'd get baby's colic if I smoked anything so refined. I'd feel like Billy Sunday, and I'd pull a long face and swear off doing everything that a man like me just natcherly likes to do. Thanks just the same, but I smoke the kind of cabbage leaves that they make consecrated lye out of, and I've got my nose so as it can't smell a whiff of anything that wouldn't knock the block off anything with a regulation smeller."

Blake smiled covertly under his small divided mustache,

and replaced the cigar in an upper pocket of his coat.

"'S all right, Kennerly. No damage done. Don't smoke cigars much myself. Prefer cigar  ttes. Find them more to my taste."

Jerimy, who had never liked Blake, snorted under his breath.

"Shouldn't wonder. There's a lot of them things made out of perfumed corn silks and wrapped in fine white paper that's got gold moniegrams on them. The moniegrams ought to taste all to the good I reckon, but demme if I think I'd care for them."

Blake shrugged disdainfully. It was not to be expected that an ordinary horse superintendent could have a cultivated taste for anything. (It was fortunate for Blake that he could be so blissfully unconscious of sarcasm or contempt when it was applied to himself. His splendidly developed egotism saved him many a blush; provided, of course, that blushing was not one of the things which he had long ago outgrown.)

Changing the subject abruptly, he entered upon a monologue about the good business of the season that was just drawing to a close; related how much Lawson relied upon him for new ideas, and how the press agents expected him to hatch up most of their "stuff" for them; gave Jerimy some pointers about horseflesh, and a great deal of unsolicited advice about how to run the horse tent to better advantage; and ended with an inquiry as to Joan Kennerly's health.

Jerimy had gone about the business of inspecting his harness, whistling softly,—let it be said here that Jerimy paid little heed to the finer points of politeness, especially

when he was supremely indifferent (as he was now) to the consequences of an indulgence in a frank lack of interest—running his fingers over the smooth, oiled surfaces, eying approvingly the shining brasses and occasionally nodding his shaggy, grizzled head as though in answer to some deep thought. But when Joan's name fell upon his ears he stopped whistling abruptly, and, though he went on examining the harness, Blake knew that his attention had been arrested.

"Same as usual, I reckon. And same as usual comes close to bein' fit as a fiddle, don't it?" Jeremy challenged, squaring his massive shoulders.

"But how long back does that *usual* apply, Kennerly?" Blake thought he detected defensive forces rising furtively behind the bulwark of bristling brows. There were little glints of blue fire that showed through the graying, sandy bushes, and Blake wondered that eyes so pale and faded could give forth such electric sparks.

"You should worry about how fur back it goes. 'Tain't none of your funeral."

"It'll be *her* funeral old man, if you don't sit up and take notice."

"Say! You been hittin' a bottle, ain't you?"

"I'm perfectly sober, and I'm deadly serious."

Jeremy grunted.

"Huh! Seriously dead would be—Hell! Do you want me to tell you what I think about a certain gink that's equestreen director for the F. & W.? I been belly-achin' to tell you for a good many years but I've held off 'cause I natcherly dislike to hurt women or children or *helpless* insecks. Now you come into my preserves

and begin givin' me a lot of gas that goes agin' my stomach. If it was laughin' gas I could stand it, but it ain't. It ain't even illuminatin'. It's sewer gas, and it stinks."

Blake caressed his cravat and adjusted his diamond pin; and then, as though he had smoothed his cruelly ruffled feathers and restored his brutally attacked equanimity, he smiled suavely.

"Now don't get your back up, old fellow. I'm here to help you. I've come to tell you something that I think you ought to know."

"I don't know as there is anything you could do to help me unless it was to learn me how to manicure my finger nails or how to raise one of them Charlie Chaplin mustaches. But if you've got somethin' on your chest to say to me, get it off quick. Don't beat around the bush none; somethin's apt to fly out and hit you on your solid ivory."

Jeremy turned from the harness and glared at Blake through his shaggy brows. Always there had been a latent antagonism between Jeremy and Blake. Both had recognized it, but neither had ever given impulse sufficient rein to draw that antipathy out of its dormant condition. Until to-day neither had, through choice, sought the other. Until to-day when Blake had struck his flint of inquisitiveness against Jeremy's steel of defiance, there had been no sparks from their mutual aversion to each other. But Jeremy had intercepted some of the appraising glances which Blake had recently been casting in Joan's direction, and it had needed only this inquiry about her, this question that smacked of suspicion, to kindle Jeremy's smouldering embers to a raging fire.

At mention of the art of manicuring, Blake raised one hand and gazed at his highly polished nails with keenest admiration. He did love to be appreciated, did Blake. His best points were so apt to be ignored by the envious. Men could be *so* jealous of a dapper fellow who had also a way with the ladies. And so many of the gentler sex had sought to entrap him with their artifices and their frank worship! Ardent creatures! But after all there was only one Joan Kennerly, only one woman to whom the citadel of his heart would open!

Citadel of his heart! He must remember that. (He had read it somewhere and it had so deeply impressed him that it had pigeon-holed itself in his memory). He would use the expression on that momentous occasion when Joan Kennerly had come to her senses and was ready and eager to hear his declaration of love. And the occasion would be soon. Fate was playing into his hands in more ways than one.

He sighed contentedly.

"No. I couldn't volunteer to teach you how to care for your nails; that's a—er—service that a—er—manicurist alone could perform. But I can give you the name of a jolly little peaches-and-cream lady that'll undertake the job when you get back to the big burg. She only charges half a buck, and she's——"

"Say! Are you kiddin' me? What the—— Now, listen! If you've got anything you want to dope out to me, get busy. Cut out the comedy; this ain't no tea party."

"Now you're huffy again. Well"—Blake sighed patiently—"as long as you're so touchy I won't waste any

time. What I wanted to tell you was something about Miss Joan."

"Get up a little speed then. You've got about one minute and I don't like your gait. You're string-haltered, ain't you?"

Jeremy hated to hear this man's lips use the name of his little idol, and he fairly bristled with that hate as he thrust his thumbs under his elastic braces and scowled at the self-satisfied Blake.

"She's grieving herself to death, Kennerly, that's what's happening to Miss Joan."

"What in—— Say! I reckon you'll be tellin' me next that I've pink hairs growin' out of my ears. Grievin'! Huh! What got that idea into your nut?"

"Oh," smiled Blake, gently stroking the prized mustache, "I do a lot of thinking" (Jeremy snorted his disbelief), "and I put two and two together and make four. Now as for Miss Joan, she's getting to look like somebody that's got the con. She's pale as Spinks under her tan, and she don't talk much to anybody; just hangs round the elephants until even her Ted acts as if he feels her neglect. She's——"

"She's *what*? If you don't get down to brass tacks right away I'll not listen to your rot."

"She's grieving for that fugitive from justice—that distinguished gentleman, Philip Dorset."

Jeremy's thumbs came out from under his braces, and his broad hands doubled into huge chunks of fists.

"You know, don't you, that you're a-talkin' about a friend of her'n and mine?"

"I know that he pulled the wool over the eyes of every-

body in The Greatest on Earth." And Blake recalled that even Trixie Snyder had been madly in love with him herself until she had got on speaking terms with the man who had chosen to be a sort of recluse, and whose aloofness had attracted every woman with the show.

"What do you mean? Just *exactly* what do you mean?"

"That he skipped as soon as he learned that detectives were on his trail. Ask Lawson." Blake had noticed the blaze of anger which had shot through the shaggy brows from the glinting blue eyes, and at mention of Lawson's name—at the offered chance to prove or to disprove—had seen the blue eyes narrow wonderingly.

He took a cigarette from a case and, tapping it gently on the back of one hand, said casually:

"The worst of it is that the scoundrel made Miss Joan care too much for him and——"

Jerimy caught the hand that held the cigarette and, holding it in a vise-like grip, thrust his head close to the surprised face of the equestrian director.

"By G—d! You take that back or I'll drag your lyin' tongue out of your peanut head!"

"Why—why, Kennerly! You've misunderstood. I—I didn't mean that—that——"

Contemptuously Jerimy flung from him the hand that had begun to tremble with fright.

"Oh, you didn't! Well, it's demmed lucky for you that you didn't. Joan Kennerly's my girl. She's mine, do you hear? And they ain't nobody in the world that can say anything to hurt her, and live. Not so long as I got blood in my veins to shed for her." The purplish color died out of his face, leaving it its usual rugged red.

Blake's flat, restless eyes were filled with venomous fury. To have been roughly handled—he, the equestrian director of The Greatest Show on Earth—flooded him with a mad desire for retaliation. But Blake was like the natives of India, who can wait patiently for the revenge that is all the sweeter for its slowness in coming.

"No, I didn't mean *that*," and he looked at the toe of a patent leather boot considerably, as if the fact remained even if he *hadn't* meant any reference to it. "It is simply a case of a man's teaching a very young girl to care for him and then skipping out when it's time to—to——"

"Time to *what*?"

"To ask her to marry him. Dorset isn't the kind that'd marry a circus girl, anyway. He's from a class that only marries its own kind. He never thought anybody in the diggings of the F. & W. was good enough for him."

"You lie! Philip Dorset was a prince! They ain't no man that ever lived that was finer'n him!"

"Then why didn't he come and talk his love affair over with the uncle of the girl who had learned to love him? Why did he go away without even telling her good-bye?"

"How do you know he did that?" Jerimy asked, ignoring the first question.

"Ask her," replied Blake triumphantly.

"But she ain't nothin' but a child!" Poor Jerimy. For an instant he floundered helplessly.

"To you, perhaps. To everybody else she's a woman."

"And what's all this got to do with you?" Jerimy's tone was bitingly sarcastic.

"Nothing, Kennerly! Nothing beyond a desire to see Miss Joan happy; and she won't be happy until you get

that man out of her thoughts. She's grieving for the man she thinks him, not for the man he really is. I—I thought you might have a talk with her and—and explain to her how hopeless her love is. That you might even forbid her to think of him. That——”

“I see.” Jerimy elbowed the speaker out of his way, pushing him unceremoniously toward the door. “I see. And I reckon you better keep a-crackin’ your own whip. It ought to be enough to keep you busy. You’re some little whip-cracker, all right! And now, ain’t that somebody a-callin’ you?” Jerimy gave a last push, then abruptly he began whistling “Home Sweet Home.” The tune floated back through the open door to Blake, who was wondering vaguely just how much he had gained.

CHAPTER XII

A NEW STYLE IN FACES

THAT night Jerimy waited in the padroom for Joan's act to finish, and his fond old heart was more than ever sorely troubled now that the puzzle had been solved. For Jerimy had spent the day in diagnosing his idol's symptoms, and Blake's gossiping tongue seemed on the verge of being corroborated.

As he stood there in the shadows waiting, Blake came through the doors that led from the arena and paused beside him. He coughed by way of prelude.

"You surely ought to induce her to give up thinking about a man that was in hiding during all the years that we knew him."

"I ain't seen no proof that he *was* 'in hidin'.'" At least Jerimy would not show how miserably his faith in his friend was wobbling.

"Well, maybe we haven't got the goods on him, but there isn't a shadow of a doubt that he's been dodging Sing Sing, and used our traveling city for his purpose."

Jerimy spat into the darkness behind him, and then, turning back to the man beside him, gave vent to one of his choicest expletives.

"Lawson'd fine you for that if he heard it," remonstrated Blake dryly.

"It's worth the price! I reckon the best oath I've got is danged cheap at Lawson's highest fine when you're a-talkin' about my friend. And let me give you an earful of the right dope—Philip Dorset might be all that you say he is, but demme! he was always too much of a gentleman to knock anybody."

"Is it knocking," expostulated Blake, "to tell you something for Miss Joan's good?"

"*Was* it for Joan's good?"

"What other reason could I have had?"

"Demmit! That's *exactly* what I'm a-wantin' to know." After a second's silence: "Now, you better run along and tend to your knittin'. I ain't much hankerin' after your suhciety. And anyway I ain't got a hanged bit of regard for swaller-tailed coats, and I just got a regular grudge agin' white gloves; they kind of fill me with a desire to do somethin' devilish. So you'd better beat it, Little Eva, before I get you all mussed up. It'd be kind of embarrassin' for Lawson to have to get up and announce to a tentful of Alabama public that he would have to give an intermission while some of his husky roustabouts got the equestreen director together; that said equestreen director had got hisself promisc'ously tangled up with a lot of props in the padroom.

"Now skip along, Little Lord Fauntleroy, you'll get all dirty out here. This ain't no spot, right now, for a knocker that's got a weaker punch in his mitt than a certain Jess Willard from Kansas. 'Tain't a healthy climate, this padroom ain't, for nobody that wears a wrist watch, and a handkerchief tucked in the edge of his sleeve. It's liable to make him break out in black and blue spots."

Blake, however cowardly he might be, was always brave enough when help was within range of his voice. Hence his slow, deliberate puff at a hastily lighted cigarette, his contemplative blowing of a smoke ring, and his exaggerated sang froid as he bade Jerimy a studiously polite good night and strolled nonchalantly away.

"Durned little jack-in-the-box! Looks like I'll have to do somethin' real rough to him yet. Don't much believe in the 'layin' on of hands' 'ceptin' in a case like this. The mind cure wouldn't operate on him, though, 'cause he ain't got nothin' like a mind for it to work on. The layin' on of hands is about all that'll help him, I reckon." Jerimy eyed his wide, strong hands speculatively.

When Joan kissed the tips of her fingers to the applauding crowds in the Big Top, sprang from Ted's shining back, thrust her satin-shod little feet into her wooden "slops," and jumping lightly over the blue ring bank, ran across the tan-bark hippodrome and out into the padroom, her eyes lighted tenderly as they met the fond, indulgent ones that peered out at her from under a hedge of bristling eyebrows.

Jerimy linked his arm through one of hers and led her out into the night. Behind the dressing tent, at the spot where they had so often gone a-trysting, they stopped mechanically.

Jerimy withdrew his hand and, lifting it, let it come to rest on Joan's coiled hair, riotously tumbled.

"You look queer, Joie. Kind of uninterested and tired. Ain't you happy no more, Joie darling?"

Joan caught her breath sharply between her little teeth. Then she laughed a jangling laugh that ran shrilly down

several octaves as if a hand had run lightly and quickly down the keys of a piano.

"Have you discovered it? I was afraid no one had noticed it."

"Noticed what, honey?"

"The bored air. It's the very latest style, Uncle Jerry. The latest way of wearing your face. You have to keep it tip-tilted dejectedly, just a little to one side, like this, and make it look as sad as possible. Haven't you noticed that all the girls on the magazine covers look like that? Why, Trixie Snyder has been cultivating it all summer. I reckon Medea is the only woman that's beautiful enough to wear her face the same way every year."

Jeremy pursed his lips and rocked to and fro on the toes and heels of his thick-soled boots. The harvest moon lighted up his ruddy face, softening the deepening lines and silvering his grizzled hair. After a moment he muttered:

"Dinged funny style!"

"Oh!" Joan patted his arm affectionately. "I don't know. You see, there have to be styles in faces the same as there are in—in clothes!"

Jeremy chewed thoughtfully at the end of a ragged, unlighted cigar.

"Reckon you're right, Joie. Come to think of it, there is a durned lot of difference 'twixt the faces the ladies wore in the old daguerreotypes of a long time ago, and those they're a-wearin' in the photographs of to-day. You're right, Joie, *exactly*!" He smoothed her ruffled hair awkwardly. "But demme if I like this here *anaemic* style. It looks like lonesomeness for home and mother."

Joan lifted her face to the pale harvest moon, and something wet glistened on the long, curling lashes of her lovely eyes.

Home and mother! How hauntingly sweet were those words. Yet it was only these last two seasons that she had realized their sweetness. Somehow, perhaps just because she didn't have one, Joan felt that a mother could have soothed her heart-ache. She felt so little and forlorn, so tossed by her emotions, so unable to cope with the problem that enveloped her.

Either Philip had not taken her because she was a *hybrid*, or because he thought that she might not want him if he told her about whatever the thing was that had driven him into the circus and out of it again. Oh, if only she could know!

Jerimy slipped an arm about the slender waist, and drew the small, tawny head to the hollow of his shoulder. There, her face hidden from his gaze, Joan winked away the tears and laughed again like that jangling ripple of piano keys down which a child has run its untrained hand.

"What a long way the cow jumped when she went over the moon," she cried suddenly, looking up at the sky. "If she were alive to-day, Lawson would send a scout out to get her for the F. & W., wouldn't he, Uncle Jerry? And he would persuade her to sign a contract for life, agreeing to jump over the moon twice daily—'Sundays excepted in some States'—and then he'd have to find some way of building a tent over the moon. Else how could he charge a dollar for a spectacle that the public could see from its own front porch?"

She laughed once more, and Jerimy's throat contracted

at the little choked, jangling ripple. He noticed, too, that her fingers picked nervously at the heavy gold chain which hung across the front of his corduroy trousers.

"Joan," he said, his voice a bit thick, "Joan, did you—do you love Philip Dorset very much?"

Joan raised her head and for a moment looked at Jerimy, a startled, frightened heart pounding against her breast.

What had he to tell her? She had felt the tension that had held him to-night, had vaguely sensed it. What was it? She shivered involuntarily.

Please, God! Grant that nothing had happened to Philip. The Philip who had gone away, without one last word, to the world beyond the ropes! The Philip who had taught her so many things! The Philip who had mended her dolls! The Philip—who—had not *wanted* her! Please, God! *Please, God!*

"Do you miss him so terribly, Joie? Do you want your elerphunt man back again? Do you, honey?"

Joan caught her two little hands together in a rigid clasp. Maybe—maybe he was coming back! Oh, if only he would! If only he'd come back, she'd be satisfied just to see him, just to hear him, just to be near him! If he only would!

A sudden hammering of the pulse in her throat hurt her.

"Tell me, Joie child. Do you want your elerphunt man back again? You don't need to mind your old Jerimy, honey. Ain't he always understood your hurts when everybody else was fooled by your whistlin' and singin'? Ain't he? And ain't he always backed you in everything?

Wouldn't he get you that old moon up there if you wanted it and there was any way he could reach it? Can't you tell me all about it, my baby that give herself to me that night on the Thames? Can't you trust your old Jerimy *now* same as you did then?"

Joan felt the trembling of the gnarled fingers that were caressing her hair. She caught a glimpse of the blunt, stubbled chin that was quivering convulsively. Then the flood of grief in her heart broke its dams.

With a little cry she threw her slim young arms round his neck and buried her face on the great wide breast that had sheltered her so often when she was a child. Then, after a long, convulsive moment, during which they clung to each other with trembling arms, she told him.

She allowed no blame to rest on Philip. He hadn't guessed, she said, that she was learning to love him in this way. And—when she had gone to him one night and had told him that—that she would marry him, he had told her it could not be; that she was young and that she would get over it. Then, the very next day, he had—*gone!*

Jerimy Kennerly listened to the faltering, hesitating voice—the voice whose first words he had heard at a time when its little owner still slept in his worshiping arms—and his old heart bled as though great arteries had burst within it. His square chin quivered, his swollen throat ached, his eyes had a filmy mist before them.

Poor little Joan! Poor little golden idol! Loving a man who had *gone away!* GONE AWAY! Demmit! Wa'n't there any red blood in his veins, or was they stuffed with sawdust! H—ll! didn't everybody love

Joan? Well, then, why had he gone away? That was it! *Why had he gone away?* Was there any truth in the gossip about him being a—a fugitive? And if there was, what then? Joan loved him and wanted him, and he guessed—he guessed, by gad! that Joan was a-goin' to get what she wanted, and if the man had done somethin' in his past that he shouldn't of done—well, there wa'n't no danger of him ever repeatin' it when he had a girl like Joan a-lovin' him, and a old dog like hisself (Jerimy) a-watchin' him.

At the end of the faltering story, Jerimy pushed Joan from him with a certain tender roughness. He coughed hoarsely, whistled heroically a bar of his familiar tune, then, bending his right arm, felt with the fingers of his hand the muscles that rose and swelled beneath the sleeve of his madras shirt.

"Demmit! I'm gettin' soft! I ought to exercise more." Then a little gruffly: "I reckon when Philip gets back to the F. & W. that there anaemic style of wearin' your pretty face'll be all out o' date. I reckon the magazine covers'll be showin' brides with orange blossoms in their hair. I cal'cate you'll follow the style?"

"Oh! Wouldn't I! Wouldn't I! But he—he'll never come back, Uncle Jerry. I—I feel it—*here*." She pressed a hand against the breast of her satin cape.

"Won't he?" Jerimy clenched his hands and straightened his slightly stooped shoulders.

Philip Dorset would come back! He'd find Philip Dorset and *bring* him back, and he guessed he'd come one way or ruther, though, o' course, he *preferred* to bring him back *alive*—and Jerimy smiled whimsically.

"*Won't* he? says I!" And Jerimy chuckled.

Hope flared up in his idol's eyes, and she laughed softly; and this time a trained hand touched the piano and music came forth.

Jerimy set his wide lips determinedly.

"Oh, *won't* he? says I!" And again there was that reassuring chuckle. Then——

Something that had been crouching low in his heart since that day when his little girl's dollies had been packed away and shipped to a New York warehouse, something that had slunk into a corner, sly and watchful as a cat, sprang up now and caught its long fangs into his rugged throat. But he bent his head like the true old Spartan that he was, and giving his idol her good night kiss, went from her slowly and with uncertain steps.

Over and over again he was whispering to himself that he was going to lose Joan. Some day he would wake up to find his Joan married! Her husband would take her away! Away from the F. & W. and from—*him!* How empty the world would be! How empty! There would be no little Joan to smile at him from the center ring; no worried Joan to bring him her troubles; no teasing Joan to hide his pipes, or to boss and bully him. Somebody else would hear the little troubles. Somebody else would hold her close when something or other ached. Somebody else would find the hidden pipes and hear the gurgling laughter. Somebody else! And he, Jerimy, had had her, loved her all these years.

Philip would take her away! She would put her little arms about her old Uncle Jerimy's neck and tell him to come often to see them. Perhaps they would even ask

him to spend the winters with them. Perhaps. But he wouldn't. He couldn't! It would be too hard to break away again when the tenting season opened and 'the smell of the sawdust in the springtime' got into his nostrils. No. He would—would just have to give her up, and be content—because she was happy. *Content!* Sufferin' souls of men! Did he think his heart was made of lolly-pops? Didn't he know, old fool, that life for him ended when *she* went out of it? He paused in his uncertain course and glowered at the moon.

She believed there was a God. He had taught her that belief—he, a hardened infidel! And there'd been times lately when she'd come close to makin' him believe it, too. (Even a God might begin to exist just to satisfy *her!*) But to-night he knowed! He knowed no God would make such—such a infernal tangle of things!

He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and whistled spasmodically as he resumed his way. But all the time the thing at his throat tore at him fearfully. He was losing his Joan, the little, golden-haired Joan that had snuggled down against the roll of fat on his ribs; that had drunk her milk from the bottle which his fingers had held; that had pulled his hair with baby hands; that had brought her stubbed little toes to be healed by his kiss. He was losing her! She was slipping—*away from him!*

A dry sob burst from his trembling lips, and something wet and glistening trickled down his furrowed cheeks.

"You demmed old idiot!" he muttered. "You stood back there a-starin' at the moon till you made your eyes water!" Violently Jerimy blew his nose.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LADY IN MADISON AVENUE

THREE days before Christmas Jerimy Kennerly slipped through the revolving door of a New York hotel, glanced furtively up and down Fifth Avenue to be sure that Joan was not within sight (she had gone off a few minutes earlier with Medea on a shopping trip), cast a weather eye toward the somber sky that hung low over Central Park—allowing his gaze to rest for an instant with carefully disguised admiration upon the ice-crystaled trees and naked shrubs that seemed to be pricking the clouds with thin, glazed fingers—and swung out upon the trail of a clue which he fervently hoped would lead him to Philip Dorset.

It was snowing gently. Little powdery flakes filled the air like thick frost. The city lay under a thin, soft blanket of fleecy white, and lumbering along toward the east, Jerimy's broad, thick-soled boots left crust-like imprints in the downy fleece.

Crowded 'buses hurtled past him. Limousines careened round the corners on two wheels. Pedestrians crunched bustling along the sidewalks, the empty-handed going to the south where lay the shops, the parcel-laden coming north where were the homes. Over all the world there seemed to have settled a tense excitement. Jerimy paused

for a moment at the edge of a curb, and squinting his eyes stared thoughtfully through the white, animated veil that hung about him. Yesterday he had gone down town with Joan, and he recalled now the pictures he had seen. After a month at the "quarters" this holiday-mad New York had seemed to be a seething ant hill, and its excitement had infected him, just as its noises had always soothed him.

There had been evergreen trees generously decorated with tinsel and candles. There had been counters piled high with "gift suggestions." There had been what had seemed to Jerimy millions of flustered, hurried, worried mothers, and billions of teasing, begging, excited children; young men who wandered about searching vaguely for something for *her*; fathers who sheepishly straddled hobby horses to see if they were "strong," or hung with boyish, sparkling eyes round counters where were being demonstrated mechanical toys.

There had been endless writing of checks, and endless counting of carefully hoarded pennies. There had been dolls that rode away in limousines pressed close to the sables of ladies in delicately scented garments, and dolls less accomplished and wonderful that were wrapped in cheap paper and tucked under tired though eager arms of plain, hollow-cheeked women, whose garments reeked with the foul, sickening odors of factories or sweat-shops. There had been crowded street cars whose perspiring, bundle-laden cargoes generated a nauseating heat, and there had been the purring motor cars in which cut-glass vases of rare exotics scented deliciously the electrically heated air.

As always at this holiday time, there had been the two streams running side by side—the rich and the poor, the grotesque and the beautiful, the pitiable and the envied; both excited, both eagerly interested in the gifts they carried, the intrinsic value and quality of which neither added to nor detracted from that eager interest. Yesterday had not differed in the least from any former Christmas shopping day; yet to Jerimy Kennerly it had not been the same.

Joan had not hung tightly to one of his fingers and dragged him ruthlessly against a tide of impatient shoppers just for the sake of a single glimpse at a gorgeous window display. Nor had she wandered gleefully ahead of him through toy departments, fingering this or that dainty doll ecstatically. There had been no maneuvering to bring him suddenly face to face with some coveted wonder, no flushed face turned to his half-challengingly, no hurrying from corner to corner just to listen to the tinkle of coins in the great iron kettles behind which Salvation Army Santa Clauses, in red cotton cloth and moth-eaten tibet, smiled benevolently through ragged gray whiskers, no clutching at his arm when one of the city's poor had dropped in a coin which he had thumbled from a pitifully flat purse.

Yesterday a strange Joan had walked pensively beside him. Yesterday, for the first time in many years, Jerimy had been left free to view the passing Christmas show, to wonder and to analyze and to *hurt*. He had wanted to feel her firm little fingers gripping his hand. He had watched anxiously for one look of eagerness, of interest. He had wished passionately to be maneuvered, brought

suddenly round to some coveted thing. But Joan-the-child, even Joan-the-girl, had not gone out with him. There walked beside him a woman, and the childishness of her face and figure did but give the lie to the look in her eyes.

"'Tain't much like our Christmases used to be!" mused Jerimy as he stared moodily through the falling snow. "'Tain't no more like our Christmases than Joie is like Joie." He ruminated sadly. "Used to be they wa'n't no rest nor nothin' for weeks afore Christmas, for Joie a-wantin' to drag me and Phil down town every day. I remember how Phil and me followed her around like a couple of express companies a-waitin' to cart home the bundles. And Lord! how she danced when we unwrapped things. Seems like as if it was only the other day. Seems like as if it wa'n't more'n a year ago that she was a-showin' us a walkin' doll and a-tellin' us how *surprised* she'd be if anybody sent it to *her*. And I remember how Phil and me had to draw straws to see which one'd have the right to buy it for her. 'Tain't the same no more! 'S all changed!" Jerimy blinked the snow-flakes off his sandy lashes.

"But if there's a Philip Dorset in this town I'm a-goin' to get him for Joie's Christmas present or my name ain't Jerimy McChesney Kennerly! If he's here, I'll find him and they ain't nothin' that'll stop me! Not nothin'!"

He thrust out his square under jaw determinedly. Then, pulling his sealskin cap farther over his anxious eyes, and buttoning closer about his thick neck the seal collar of his great coat, he swung aboard a passing 'bus and rode away in the direction of his clue.

Six weeks ago when the circus had disbanded the artists and artizans had come flying north like homing pigeons, to the white lights of Broadway, thence to go their separate ways until the tenting season should come once more and call them all together again. Some of them had homes in distant cities to which they hurried once their lungs had filled themselves hungrily with Broadway's highly seasoned, gasoline-flavored atmosphere. For most of these men and women were epicures as to the air they breathed; and nowhere was there to be found so much smoke, soot, perfume, gas, escaped steam, stale restaurant odors and exhaled liquor stench as on this beloved juggernaut which breathed its intoxicating breath into you while it emptied your pockets.

What was the smell of clover or of the dew on a field in the early morning to a nomad of the circus, once the sawdust and tan-bark had deserted his nostrils? In the spring and through the summer the sawdust and tan-bark satisfied, delighted. But when winter came it brought with it a hunger for the exquisite stench of the Juggernaut. The song of a lark might enter his heart when the world was green, but once the trees had gone bare his ears yearned to ache with joyous pain under the deafening noises of the Sixth Avenue "L," of the honking of horns, the riveting of steel, the clanging of bells, the pounding, the yelling, the crashing, the laughing, the splendid ear-splitting roar! The song of a lark? Sure! But not in the winter months.

Jeremy was one of the few who longed with all their hearts for the lark and the clover and the scent of dust under a warm summer shower, though he pretended even

to himself that Broadway was the home of his heart, the Mecca of all that attracted him. Dear old hypocrite! How fiercely he hated himself whenever he caught himself red-handed smelling a flower, sitting in a "highbrow" concert hall, or aching with a suddenly aroused sympathy.

A sympathetic heart and a tendency toward sentiment had been his besetting weaknesses, and he had fought them both with an ever-increasing scorn for them and for himself. But the fight was always a draw. He might hide from others the hated weaknesses which sapped his self-respect, but there was himself to reckon with. That sneaking, womanish, sentimental side of him had always smelled the flower, bought the concert ticket, or filled his traitorous old eyes with salt water before the masterful side of him had had time to assert itself; and this inability to win the fight, the haunting fear that others might guess these shameful parts of his nature, made him grow constantly more gruff, more ludicrously profane, more hard and blustery.

At ten o'clock Jerimy had left the hotel. At ten-thirty he was sitting on the extreme edge of a gilded chair in a wide, low-ceilinged drawing-room in Madison Avenue. He was wretchedly uncomfortable, painfully ill at ease. But for his beloved little Joan he would have suffered even greater anguish.

He twirled his cap nervously. He crossed and uncrossed his legs, stared moodily at his ill-fitting, square-toed boots, moved his shaggy eyebrows up and down, and sent his face into various contortions. His bluish, stubbled lips twisted together as though mutely rehearsing the conversation which was to ensue, and of which he

meant to be master. He picked at an imaginary thread on his coat sleeve. He pushed short, square-tipped fingers through his wiry, grizzled hair, mussing it hopelessly; and had it not been that the ever constant thought of Joan sustained him, Jeremy would have sent that gilded chair spinning to the opposite wall in his haste to get out of the chilling, inhospitable atmosphere of the stuffy, conventional place. But all this torture, and more, *very much more*, would Jeremy have endured for his wee little lamb.

He had been there an immeasurable time when the long velvet draperies that curtained the door parted and a vision of cold, crystalline haughtiness floated into the room.

Jeremy rose awkwardly, dropped his twisted cap, stooped to recover it and upset his chair.

"You wished to see me?" the vision asked wonderingly, frankly puzzled.

Now Jeremy knew very well that he had not *wished* to see her, and that he would be glad never to see her again; but he knew, too, that he had desperate need to follow up his clue, and *she* was the clue. So he bowed stiffly (not at all sure that gentlemen did not bend their knees when bowing to a lady in so grand a room) and fumbled uncomfortably at his soft fur hat. Then Jeremy started to unfold the business which had thrust him thus unceremoniously into the august lady's presence.

But Philip Dorset must know somethin' or ruther about this house, he insisted desperately when the lady had declared she knew nothing whatever about his friend, adding that the servant who had allowed her to be disturbed in this manner by a stranger should be justly reprimanded.

manded, and touching a finger to a wall button as she spoke.

"That bunch of brass buttons!" Jeremy grinned. "He never had nothin' to say about it. I just *come* in, and I told him to call the 'lady of the house.'" Then, hurriedly, an anxious eye on the wall button: "You see there was a mystery about this here man, Philip Dorset. Maybe he's got some other name or——"

The lady's finger dropped suddenly from the button, and her eyes narrowed at Jeremy. Something like a gasp sounded in her throat. With changed manner she invited Jeremy to sit down, and then very graciously she listened to Jeremy's story—such parts of it, at least, as Jeremy saw fit to tell her.

There followed an hour of surprises for both, and when Jeremy Kennerly left the house he was perspiring and purple and in his heart was a strangling hopelessness. Clutched tightly in one tense hand was a card on which was written the address of a law firm, where, so he had been triumphantly informed, he might corroborate the malignant thing that had blasted his hopes.

At four in the afternoon a weary, grizzled old man stumbled up the stoop of a prim, old-fashioned house that was one of a long row of brown-stone fronts in the Bronx. He was trembling violently as he followed a prim gray woman into a prim drab reception room. More at home here than he had been in the Madison Avenue house, he sank heavily down upon a slippery horse-hair couch, and unbuttoned the sealskin collar which seemed to be choking him. For a long moment he sat there, slumped together, shoulders drooping,

his head sunk dejectedly between them; then a voice broke in upon him, and he rose stiffly to his feet.

"Jerimy Kennerly!"

"That's me!" Jerimy made a heroic effort to steady his swaying figure. He was gazing straight into the gray eyes of Philip Dorset when his hand was grasped in a warm handshake.

"Your—your lawyers—gave me your address, and I—" he was glowering at Philip with an electric fierceness—"I come to find out why you made such a demmed mess of things. I—I wouldn't 'a believed it!"

"You know! You have learned about—" Philip Dorset's face turned toward the window—"her!"

Jerimy nodded, a thick oath escaping his purple lips.

"I found your *wife*!" Philip Dorset sank into a chair and buried his pale face in his long hands, and Jerimy went on mercilessly. "Funny what a reach coincidence has, ain't it? Now I saw a certain street and number on somethin' or ruther of your'n in your tent one day, and it just stuck in my mind like a pill sticks in your throat when you ain't got nothin' wet to swaller it down with. And when you went away and didn't leave no address for anybody that might want to write to you occasional-like, that street and number just pops up and stands around in front of me till I don't get no peace. And then—I finds out about Joan!" Jerimy gulped, and his wide chin quivered.

Philip leaped to his feet. He caught Jerimy's arm in a tense grip, and his great frame, strangely gaunt, bent above him menacingly, like some savage, half-starved beast.

"What's that about Joan? What's happened to her? Good God, man, why don't you speak?"

Jeremy lifted his head heavily.

"Enough has happened to her—to make me—want to kill you, Philip Dorset, 'stead of shakin' your mitt."

Philip bent still closer upon him. His long fingers dug into the broad, tanned wrist.

"Just what do you mean? Where is Joan? What is it that has happened to her?" His voice came through lips that were stiff. Veins swelled out upon his forehead and temples, and little flecks of blood streaked his dilated gray eyes.

"I mean," said Jeremy wearily, "that you let her love you—that she loves you *now*, and that—that—*God!*—you was already *married!*"

Philip Dorset's gripping fingers relaxed, and he drew a long breath of relief. He stared at the floor for an instant; then he looked back into Jeremy's eyes sorrowfully. "That was the reason I—came away!"

"And not because of the detectives?" Jeremy glanced up hopefully. He despised a coward, did Jeremy. If the man before him had committed some crime he could forgive it, but that he should run from its consequences! That was the sin unpardonable!

Philip stared in amazement.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well," began Jeremy in embarrassment; and then he told Dorset about the man who had called at the F. & W. lot, thereby starting the ball of gossip. As he talked Jeremy saw a smile break through the clouds that darkened the handsome face of the other man.

"I think I know what they wanted," exclaimed Philip. "They had come from my lawyers on some special business regarding properties which I own and which they wished to purchase. I came only because of—of Joan. Do you believe me, Jerimy?"

He held out his hand, and involuntarily Jerimy's short fingers closed round it convulsively. The suffering in the gray eyes that had always been so opaque and expressionless, so cold and secretive, was proof sufficient for the sympathetic Jerimy.

"For Joan! You did it for—Joan," whispered Jerimy hoarsely.

Philip Dorset bowed his dark head.

"I'd loved her always, Jerimy, from that moment when I first picked her up in my arms and held her close. But when she had grown to be too big for my caresses, I began to love her in—another way.

"And when, that last night, I discovered that she was learning to—to care, I came away. No one can know how I suffered that night. No one can know how difficult it was to look into the sweet, tearful eyes, at the dear, trembling red lips, and—not give my arms their way.

"You, Jerimy—you who love her, too—must try to understand!"

"*But there's that lady in Madison Avenue!*" reminded Jerimy gruffly.

"Yes." Philip Dorset's voice was colorless and dull. "There's the lady in Madison Avenue!"

He turned and walked slowly to a window, where he stared out for a moment at the snow-blanketed street. Then, without turning his head, he began in a tuneless

monotone the story of his past, not as a defense but as an explanation which he felt was due to the man across the room.

"I didn't know that she—was in America until recently. They—she has been abroad for several years. She makes her home in Paris. I—married her—when I was just two weeks out of college. She was older—several years—than I. We went to one of the big hotels and I was unpacking some luggage—my man was ill—when I came upon a letter from another man written to—her. The postmark was that of the day previous. I had read it before I was conscious of the act, but the second I had finished it, I was acutely conscious of everything. In that instant I became a cynic.

"I knew why she had married me; I knew that she loved this other man, whose purse was slender; and I knew that never again would I see her. *I never have!*

"I went away—to India. I lived there a year. I hunted big game with an Englishman whom I met there, and I learned to know the elephant. Then"—Philip stared into vacancy, his eyes cold and hard, his fine mouth smiling bitterly—"then a report reached America that I had died, a victim of India's most malignant fever.

"Seven months later I arrived in America. I went direct to the offices of my lawyers. There is no need to describe the shock which I gave them or the one which they gave me. My wife had married again! Two weeks after she had received the news of my death she had married the author of that letter. Now—so my lawyers had been informed—there was a child coming."

He paused and laughed harshly.

"The god of sacrifice was insatiable! So I went away again, poor, blind, foolish boy! I wanted to hide until the infant had arrived. By that time, I hoped to have thought of some way out of the tangle both for the woman and myself, but most of all for the child. But—well—there has never seemed to be—a way.

"My lawyers argued, but I refused to be swerved from my purpose. They gave up at last and carried out my instructions. They paid to her annually the bulk of my income and left me free to wander—aimlessly, foolishly. Then one day I happened to think of the circus. My knowledge of elephants would get me a place with one, I was sure. It did. I thought the circus a lark. I was still very young, and still fond of adventure.

"And then, Jeremy"—he turned suddenly, and his tired eyes looked back at the apoplectic face at the other end of the room—"on that very first night, I found your little Joan! You know what she became to me in the years that followed. What you didn't know then was how miserably *lonely* I had been, how hungry for human love and companionship. You couldn't understand that, Jeremy."

"Couldn't I?" Jeremy closed one eye and lifting the bushy brow of the other, peered up into the drawn face turned to his. "Couldn't I? Huh! I reckon *I* never starved like that! I reckon *I* don't know nothin' about how it feels not to belong to nobody nor to have nobody belong to me. I reckon *I've* been just *swamped* with love all my life. I reckon *I* been terribly sought after and mollicoddled. NOT! I guess if you could of seen inside of me that night over there in London, and could of seen

the way my heart flipfopped when that little head of her'n cuddled down against a spot that nobody nor nothin' in all the world had ever cuddled against; I guess if you could of seen the durned old fool that set up all night a-holdin' that soft, cuddly little bundle in his arms; I guess if you could of seen him a-sneakin' out to buy milk, or a-kneelin' down by the bedside when she was asleep, and *a-cryin'*, him that hadn't never cried before; well, I guess you'd give me credit for understandin' just *exactly* how *you* felt when you come to the F. & W. and found—*her*."

Jeremy's seamed old face was eloquent with sympathy. The grandfather's clock in the corner ticked solemnly, and the souls of these two men drew very close together in that moment of deep understanding.

"After that," returned Philip when a long interval of silence had elapsed, "I gave up trying to think of a way out of the tangle. I let myself drift. I was a nameless (for I had left the name of Warner behind me), homeless exile, but—I had found the greatest blessing in the world—*human love*. She came into my heart that night and closed the doors behind her. She ruled me. She tyrannized over me, but she let me feast upon the morsels of love that she could spare from you. Then one day I saw my past rise up and stick out at her its mocking, forked tongue. I—I mobilized my strength, and—came away."

"But," whispered Jeremy huskily, "you come away too late. The damage was done!"

When Jeremy rose to go he growled something incoherently, and Philip Dorset replied with equal incoher-

ence. Then these two men gripped each other's hands pityingly, gazed into each others eyes sorrowfully, and without another word fell apart, faces grim and set, shoulders pathetically squared.

Outside the house, Jerimy stood for a long moment staring back at the door which had just swung shut behind him.

"'Pears," he ruminated, gently pulling the bristling hairs of an elevated eyebrow, "like as if he needs somebody or ruther to take care of him worse'n Joie does. They're just alike—ain't a mite of difference. They ain't nuther one of them as wouldn't go through hell-fire-and-brimstone for what he thought was *right*."

"I cal'clate," he mused thoughtfully, "that they's a Missus Philip that's got to be got rid of; and I cal'clate that they's two certain persons that's got to be took care of, 'cause they ain't got the right kinds of bits in their mouths and they don't gee the right direction. I reckon they's got to be some killin' and draggin' out. Joie's got to have her elerphunt man, and Phil's got to have my—*his* little idol." His square chin moved tremulously. "'Pears," he confided to the closed door already thickly veiled by the falling snow, "like as if it's all up to me! Demmit! All up to me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

UNDER CANVAS AGAIN

A FEW days later it was necessary for Jerimy to return to the F. & W. winter quarters (being the head of the horse department of a circus gave one little time for the Great White Way!), and though Joan had wanted to go with him, he had firmly withheld his permission. It is to be understood, of course, that Joan had used none of her never-failing artifices or powers of persuasion. Jerimy had never been able to withstand Joan's wheedling, and he was devoutly glad when she accepted his decision with such unwonted meekness.

There followed a dreary, lonely winter for Joan. She wandered about much of the time alone, very tactfully yet withal very determinedly refusing Medea's tender companionship. She rode on the park's frozen bridle path. (Ted being safely stalled at the quarters, a horse from a nearby stable had to satisfy her). She walked innumerable miles along winding park paths where stalactitic icicles projected above one from the naked limbs of trees, occasionally halting when a returning thrill of youth bubbled through her to gather up two handfuls of snow and after she had deftly packed it into a hard ball, to throw it at a rock or an empty bench with the skill

and precision of a half-grown boy. She wandered aimlessly down the Avenue and through the shops, and it was seldom that the cunningly displayed, vanity-appealing things in windows and on counters scaled her numb oblivion.

Jerimy came to her for week ends, and she went to Jerimy for an occasional day. But these were hurried, worried days for Jerimy. There was so much to be done about which Joan must know nothing. There were mysterious telephone calls which might arouse her slumbering curiosity. There were letters not meant for her eyes. There was thinking, much thinking, to be done (for Jerimy Kennerly—blustery, simple soul—was suddenly up to his ears in intrigue). Then, too, there was the regular work: hundreds of horses to be looked after, grooms and trainers to be effectually sworn at, and conferences to be had with the “boss behind the boss.”

“’Tain’t like as if I was a real human,” he would grumble explosively to Joan. “’Tain’t as if the cabarets didn’t need me, or Mr. Rockerfeller wa’n’t lonesome without me! But as I’ve said to the cabarets and Mr. Rockerfeller, many’s the time they’d be all-fired glad to change places with me, seein’ that I’ve got *you!*” Then Jerimy would laugh uproariously, though under his great breast his heart lay like lead.

Just how much of Blake’s story was true, Joan did not know, but always she felt that the mystery of her elephant man’s past had risen from the dead and driven him forth from those who loved him; and always she loved him and wanted him.

Had Jerimy explained the mystery of Philip’s past to

her, Joan might have lived that long winter differently. She might have breathed the air of it contentedly, because she would have known that *he* was breathing it. She might have ached less fiercely for a trouble which she understood. She might have—indeed, she would have—hoped, for hope rises so easily even from thinnest ashes. She might have laughed oftener, whistled and sung a bit more spontaneously, and lived more joyously. Yet—how could Jeremy know all this? Poor old Jeremy who knew so little of this species of love, who had been so sadly slighted by the small fat god, so utterly ignored.

He could only go on believing that silence was the wisest of policies, and hoping that Joan would get herself together again when the smell of the tan-bark and sawdust got into her little nose.

For there wa'n't no way you could skin trouble as easy as gettin' under the blare of a wind-jamming circus band, and right in front of a few thousand rubes. Yes, sir. That was the way to skin trouble. And when you'd once got her skun she stayed skunned.

Once during the winter he had received a note from Dorset asking humbly, anxiously, if Joan were ill. It said that he, Philip, had seen her walking in the park (though he did not mention how many times he had seen her there), and that her eyes had appeared unusually large and her face painfully wan.

Very carefully Jeremy had written an answer, over the composition of which he spent several worried days. It would never do, he figured, to allow Dorset to know just how much Joan was grieving. That might bring him from under cover, and—and there wa'n't no

way that his comin' to her could help her. No way a-tall. Dorset was married. 'Twa'n't no difference if he didn't love his wife, or if his wife had another husband (demmit, it was a rummy mess!); that didn't help Joan no ways you could look at it. And he wa'n't a-goin' to let temptation come a-pilferin' round those two, not while he was safe out of Matteawan, and could dope out ways and means of perfectin' 'em.

So Philip learned in that answering note that Joan had had a cold but was better now, and that it was a very dull winter at the quarters; that there were two baby camels and one baby giraffe; that spring would soon be here; and that Central Park was a lovely place for walkin' but that it was a bad place for catchin' cold (Philip wondered a little over that ambiguous sentence and smiled when he discovered its meaning), and he would advise Philip not to walk there any more. At the end Philip had found that Jeremy "remained" his friend through "hell-fire."

Then, when March had roared in like a lion and crept out like a lamb, the scent of the sawdust was in Joan's nostrils once more, and rehearsals had begun in Madison Square Garden. There was the renewing of friendship ties. There were the misty greetings, the gripping hand-clasps, the relating of the winter's adventures or monotonies, the eager questions, the hurried, almost incoherent replies, the planning for the season, the laughing or tearful accounts given of those who were missing from the F. & W. family circle, and the gradual settling down to the routine of work.

Joan loved more than ever the sweet fraternity that existed among the members of her traveling city. She

loved to know that nowhere were the bonds of friendship more carefully guarded. She loved to know that a cracked skull or a broken ankle brought greater demonstration than the mere sending of flowers. She loved to feel the swift current of sympathy which ran over the lot when a shapeless heap was gathered up from the sawdust and carried out through the back doors of the Big Top as the audience laughed over what it believed to have been a part of the performance most cleverly acted, or sighed contentedly over the tragedy which it felt a dollar had entitled it to.

When the huddled heap of what a moment before had been a comrade had been gently deposited in a corner of the doctor's tent, she could read the grief in the painted faces that gathered silently round it.

How many times had she seen these pitiful tragedies, looked on at them with aching eyes while the blare of the band in the Big Tob beat mockingly in her ears, and the applauding of the audience seemed to be desecrating that awesome moment when the Angel of Death was standing by with up-lifted scythe! Yet never had she viewed such a scene with such fierce rebellion as on an afternoon in early June when she and Jerimy stood together in the padroom chatting with a wholesome, boyish young clown.

"Yes, sir!" Jerimy was saying, "they ain't another man in the world that can do that kind of flying-trap work. Two somersaults and a twister! He begins where the others quit. He's——"

"Kennerly! My God, Kennerly, she's not getting up!"

The clown's face was turned toward the end ring at the right, and Joan, whose eyes had also been on

the ring, shivered as her gaze came round to the boy.

Over there in that ring this boy's sister had dropped, with not even a cry, from her shining slack wire, which had quivered oddly high above the heads of the gaping audience in the terrifying instant when the little artist had gone hurtling through the air. Joan shivered again as she saw the agony of fear behind the grease paint and ghastly white powder of the boy at her side.

She looked on dumbly when some one forced a draught of brandy between his chalked lips. With hot eyes she watched them hold him back from the little shapeless heap as it was carried through the padroom. With pounding breast she stood near him while he awaited his cue. Together they had entered the Big Top, and there her heart nearly burst for him as he went staggering round the hippodrome.

The audience, mistaking his uncertain gait for an imitation of intoxication, laughed until it held its aching sides; and all the time there lay in a corner of another tent the broken, lifeless body of his sister.

Joan hated the audience as it laughed; or at least she thought she did! That world out there beyond the hippodrome was the world that had taken away her elephant man! Those people were smug in their security from danger. When tragedies came to their homes they had the luxury of privacy in their sorrow. They could weep, and they didn't have to "go on with the show!"

She ached for that boy stumbling blindly round the hippodrome, trying heroically to do the things which he had done so mechanically a thousand times before. The chalked face with its grotesque black lines was distorted.

The trembling hands that clutched their foolish slapsticks and the stumbling feet were making brave efforts to do their work. It was tragic, and Joan's rebellious young heart filled with renewed anger against the world of Philip Dorset.

"You loafed through your act to-day, Miss Joan," remarked Sidney Blake, stepping in front of her as she was making her way to the back doors.

"Did I?" Joan's anger was on the verge of finding a vent when Blake slid gracefully out of the way and crossed the hippodrome.

Joan's small hands were clenched and her eyes were yellow flames as she turned to look after him, and Blake swinging about suddenly met her gaze and—smiled.

Since the exit of Dorset, Blake had smiled most encouragingly upon her, and he smiled with a splendid benignancy and grandiloquent generosity which he hoped she would understand. He wanted her to know that he was putting down to maidenly modesty and a lack of sophisticated poise her cool indifference or her fits of anger. But he confessed to himself in a moment of candor that Joan was a member of the species that he did not thoroughly comprehend.

Late in August something happened which made Joan heroine of the F. & W. circus. All day the heat had been oppressive, stifling. The humidity had weighed heavily on laboring lungs. The afternoon audience was unresponsive and lackadaisical, its energy for wielding palm-leaf fans, and its greedy thirst—which seemed doomed to remain unslacked—being the only things about it that were not languished and listless.

The artists, the clowns, who were much too warm to be funny, the trainers of animal acts, who found their beasts ugly and sullenly disobedient, and the aerialists, who were almost overcome with vertigo while working their traps high up against the white, heat-radiating canvas that billowed from the center poles, came from the Big Top pale and half fainting; staggered weakly through the padroom and on to the dressing rooms; sank inertly onto their small camp stools; and tore madly at their mocking, gay garments.

Tights dripping with perspiration were hung on the steel racks beside the trunks to dry. Spangles and tinsel glittered more brightly for the moisture that beaded them. Starch had sweated out of the white suits of the clowns, and the absurd ruffles drooped dejectedly.

When the supper flag had gone up over at the cook-house, the tables filled slowly, and there was a perceptible lack of interest bestowed upon the menu cards. Little was eaten, but a great quantity of iced tea was consumed.

"It's a-goin' to storm like—like hades, Joan," Jeremy remarked, leaning across the table to reach a dish of olives. "It's just natcherly a-goin' to gather over there in the west, and then it's a-goin' to blow some of this fire-and-brimstone out of the atmosphere. And after that I reckon the demmed old farmers'll say that they've had too much rain. They ain't never satisfied. It's allers rainin' too much or too little for the farmers. If I was the weather man I'd send 'em a bunch of climate that'd make 'em jump at plain, *ordinary* weather with speeches of welcome and bottles of grape-juice. I'd make 'em stop

tryin' to meddle with *other* folkses' weather." Jeremy glanced out of the corner of his eye at the girl at his side.

She was scribbling on the back of a menu card and smiling faintly. Jeremy gulped down a tall glass of iced tea and continued his discourse.

"A durned old fool to-day come a-rubberin' around the lot and got as fur as the horse tent afore he found out his company wa'n't wanted inside the ropes. When I'd got him back where he belonged he had the nerve to try to get friendly. Wanted to know if I thought it would rain, and said he hoped it wouldn't as the hay was all cut in this county and that it'd sour or mold if it got wet. Now ain't that like the durned fools? They ain't nobody but a farmer that thinks weather was just made for him."

The olive dish was empty now, and Jeremy shoved it back across the table. He mopped his steaming face with his huge handkerchief.

"Take it from me, Joie, they's a-goin' to be a county full of wet hay to-morrow mornin', and I guess sour hay ain't no worse'n *dead people*; and I seen several humans just double up to-day like as if they'd been hit in the middle with a joint of lead pipe!

"You ain't et nothin', Joie. Be you sick?" He searched Joan's face solicitously.

Joan sighed and wrinkled her nose.

"Yes. It—it's poetry again, Uncle Jerry, and it's very bad."

Then with a swish of her short linen skirt she left Jeremy alone with a fresh glass of iced tea.

"Bad! Huh! I'd a heap sight ruther read her pomes

than Shakespeare's. 'Tain't so mixed up and Bibleish. And you can't tell me that a real poet uses them senseless 'thou's' and 'thee's.' A real poet writes just like we talk, and they ain't nobody around this shebang that's got sand enough to pull any of that 'thou' stuff. No molly-coddle could *live* and use them words to me. Maybe Caesar liked them; *maybe* he did! But look what happened to him. I'll bet it was the feller that 'thou'd' him the most that pushed him off the map." He drained his glass thirstily.

"And look at Joie's writin'! Why, they wa'n't none of them ginks that could write like that. And I ain't one of them kind as what don't know what he's a-talkin' about. Didn't I see some of Mr. Dickens' ink-slingin' in the British Museum in London? And some of the scratchin' of other notorious poets? I guess I did! And take it from me, they didn't even know how to make a double s. They made one of them look like an f. And they never knowed no more about spellin' than I do, and I don't know more'n you could put in your eye. They spelled a lot of words a different way from what our newspapers spells them, and I reckon they ain't a hell of a lot about spellin' that newspapers ain't acquainted with. No, sir! I'd ruther read Joie's pomes'n anything else that was ever writ. When it comes to poetin', I cal'clate Joie can put it all over them old sword fighters that the world makes such a hullabulloo about!"

That night the Big Top was packed despite the heat. The fan vendors did a land-office business, and ice-cream cones disappeared as if by magic. The band near the big rear doors puffed out its cheeks and blared its loudest

as though hoping to drive the heat away by sheer force of sound waves.

An electric stillness had crept into the air, exaggerating oddly the various noises. The dressing rooms were tense with it, the animal trainers were poignantly aware of it, the animals in their cages were restless and nervous under it. Only the audience, waiting expectantly, were blissfully unconscious of it.

Once or twice during the half hour that preceded the pageant which opened the performance, Leo, Zetta's largest and fiercest lion, had roared his displeasure, and Joan, glancing toward the far corner of the dressing-room where Leo's mistress sat before her open trunk, saw the supple body in its gay, boyish little suit of flaming red broadcloth, military braid and shining brass buttons, go rigid. A moment later she saw Zetta rise, when the band had sounded the cue for the number in which her act appeared; saw her walk quickly down the aisle between the rows of trunks, pause at the door of the narrow corridor, reach out one hand and clutch at the canvas sidewall, and then—Joan saw her turn her dark head slowly and look back down the length of the dressing-room in an odd, tragic way. That look sent Joan's nerves jumping like so many spiral springs.

"Something's wrong with Zetta," she confided to Medea as she put the finishing touches to her make-up. "She—she scares me—sometimes. Spanish people——"

"Are like all other people,"—Trixie, who happened to be passing down the aisle, paused beside Joan's trunk—"when they happen to love somebody who *doesn't love them!*" She laughed softly.

Joan did not look up, but she jabbed a lip-stick viciously into a cold-cream jar and, flinging herself impetuously past the intruder, ran down the aisle, out into the open, across the dew-wet grass, and into the padroom.

Zetta was just coming off. The lion wagon, drawn by four prancing white horses, came through the wide doors with a jangling of brass-trimmed harness, and just behind it came Zetta and the swarthy Hindu keeper. Zetta was speaking rapidly, emphatically, in the keeper's native tongue. Her black eyes were hard and brilliant as pieces of Italian jet, and there was something triumphant in her step and bearing, something oddly at variance with the clenched hands and the droop at the corners of the carmined mouth.

Joan caught and held one of the restless hands for a moment, despite the fact that all the other members of her number were already crossing the hippodrome. Pressing it impulsively she hurried to ask:

"Was Leo ugly to-night? I've been worried. He smelled the storm that's coming. I heard him roaring, and I—I was afraid for you, because—because you haven't seemed—well."

Zetta shrugged the shoulders in the scarlet military coat, and a hissing little laugh came from between her teeth.

"That's eet. I no well." She shrugged again deprecatingly. "*El corazon manda las carnes!*" She smiled as Joan looked puzzled. Then her eyes began once more to glitter. "I no keen dominate Leo to-night, you theenk, yes? Heem be master. Heem no lek smell of storm. Heem mek rest of my beasts mad lek heem. An' you

theenk w'at they keen do to me! Yes?" She laughed triumphantly and patted with jeweled fingers the hand that held one of hers.

"Leo, he theenk that too. He growl an' snarl an' no will min' me. But I show heem! I feex him! *Caramba!* I keen hear heem whine yet. I wheep heem. I dominate heem, an' I no even use my revolver. Lawson, he look on close. An' the publico eet mek noise lek never before! An' Blake—heem come ver' near an' heem look admiration, an' heem smile at me beauteeful. Ah! Eet was one gr-r-ran' night!" Zetta laughed softly, gave a last appreciative pat to Joan's hand, and pushed the girl gently toward the arena as if her moment of triumphant joy were too great to share even with so tender a friend. Joan, her heart relieved that the brave little figure in its gay red cloth and shining brass buttons had come to no harm, went clattering in her wooden shoes across the hippodrome.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORM

JERIMY, looking on at the center ring, thought Joan had never looked so lovely. Her opalescent chiffons swirled and fluttered about her until she resembled a shimmering conch-shell perched upon its slender, spiral point.

"Things is comin' my way," he whispered thoughtfully, "and if somethin' don't trip up somewheres I'm a-goin' to pull off the big stakes!" He fingered his blunt chin, and cast an eye toward the chaos of black behind him just as it was ripped by a vivid line of lightning.

"'S comin' fast. Reckon I better get round to the horses and sorter straighten things up a bit."

It was just as Joan made her first vault over Ted's back that a hint of the storm reached her. She lifted her eyes to the canvas overhead. Already it had begun to ripple and billow with the sudden wind that sucked at it. Her anxious gaze sought the place where Lawson usually sat. He was not there!

Ted's little pointed ears reared nervously, but Joan reassured him with a swift touch of her hand as she cleared his back in a second vault. A whisper of the wind came to her above the noise of the band. The huge center pole that was nearest her ring creaked threateningly as

she and Ted went flying past it. Ted slackened his speed and she dug a satin-shod heel into his shoulder, imperatively urging him on. Then again she raised her dilating amber eyes to the billowing canvas above.

There, so high in the air that they seemed dwarfed, was a company of aërialists swinging by hand or foot to bar or ring, muscles taut under the strain of a one-arm plange, bodies, obedient to the will, circling bars or flying through space to other bars; and all the time the canvas that had begun to flap insinuatingly just a few feet above them spelled a word the thought of which made Joan's flesh turn cold.

It all happened so quickly! And to those who sat in painted seats it was an experience never to be forgotten. To those who belonged to the circus it was but another wind-storm, another battle with the most deadly foe of their tent city; a battle where the only weapons that count are quick wits and steady nerves; a battle that usually leaves in its wake disaster and havoc, with sometimes a tinselled, broken body or the crushed carcass of a beast.

Joan, somersaulting on Ted's shining back, listened in an aching suspense for the whistle of the boss canvasman. The great center poles were beginning to tremble, the aërial rigging to vibrate perilously! Joan looked again at the flying trapeze and the aërial company and shuddered.

Why didn't the boss canvasman blow his whistle? Where was Lawson? Why didn't that stupid Blake give the signal for the aërialists to cut their act and drop down into the net at once? Why didn't he give the necessary instructions to the arena crew of men, who were getting

rattled and nervous at the edge of the platforms and ring-banks? And *what were the elephants doing?*

Then, above the noise of band, audience and straining canvas, came a sharp, shrill whistle! It was the emergency whistle—the signal to “guy down” the tents with extra stakes and ropes!

Many khaki-uniformed men ran toward the rear doors just as Blake blew the whistle which gave the order to the others to get about their various emergency tasks on the inside of the tent. That second whistle also called “finish” to those supple-bodied men and women whose lives hung by the frailest thread high up near the top, where the aerial rigging was threatening to come smashing down to earth.

Thus it was that the wondering audience grew a bit worried and instinctively sensed a hint of brewing trouble as they saw the abrupt ending of the “death-daring” aerial acts, the swiftness with which men went to answer that first mysterious whistle—men in brown uniforms, men in blue uniforms, workmen, ushers, and even the vendors of peanuts, pop-corn, ice-cream cones and fans; and it started up in alarm.

But at least Blake knew his duties, and a storm was not an unprecedented thing in the annals of the Farnum and Williams’ circus. He spread his arms with a Delsart movement that was reminiscent of a gesture which he had one time seen the late Richard Mansfield make.

He raised a hand, peremptorily silencing the band. He adjusted the position of his silk hat, which slanted inward toward the top, French-fashion; leaned with rare insouciance against a frantically dancing center pole (for

by now the squall had burst in all its fury, and the poles were lifted free of the ground by the struggling canvas top to which they were fast); and, extending his white-gloved hands, palms upward, called out to that part of the audience which was within range of his voice that there was no danger—really none at all. He walked down the hippodrome with jaunty deliberateness and repeated the words to another part of the audience. Then he called imperatively to his assistant and sent him round the hippodrome in the opposite direction.

Together these two men quieted the panic-stricken crowd. And all the time Sidney Blake—this theatrically insouciant little equestrian director—was thinking:

“I wonder if she is looking at me now? I wonder if she saw me do that? She’ll have to hand it to me for cool-headedness. She’ll have to——”

He was in the middle of that last sentence for the tenth time when a huge center pole, dancing and swinging about at its base like a thing possessed, struck him down. Giving him no time to rise, it circled demoniacally above him and came straight at his head with appalling force, and—Sidney Blake was no longer master of the Big Top. He was vanquished. There was instant panic. Women screamed, men shouted, children cried, and everybody seemed to be making mad efforts to climb over everybody else. The band did its loudest and best to calm the storm that now began to rage on the inside of the Big Top, but its efforts were futile.

Joan, finishing her act, had not seen Blake go down beneath that pendulum-like pole, and she was just looking about for him, wondering why he did not blow the signal

that would send the present number out and bring the next one on, when a terrific clap of thunder drowned the pandemonium of puny noises that had been roaring in her ears.

Like a flash came the thought of the herd of elephants, and as though in answer to it, there issued from the menagerie a loud trumpeting. At first it was the voice of Venus only that she heard, but in an instant—the instant that was consumed in making Ted understand that she wanted him to take her with all speed to the menagerie—the trumpeting had become a wild chorus.

Lawson, standing wild-eyed now beside the door through which the unconscious Blake had just been carried, called sharply to a passing clown:

"Get round to the menagerie. Something must be wrong." Then to another clown who had just come up: "The bulls are still under canvas. I'm afraid Arkansas Dick is having trouble with them; that he can't get them out! It'd be Hell if they started a stampede. They'd tear this place up by the roots, and they'd make mincemeat of this scared, crazy crowd." And Lawson's pudgy fingers twitched and his face grew a shade more purple than its usual tone.

Then his eyes caught the shimmer of a satiny black horse and the flutter of opalescent chiffons flying down the hippodrome toward the doors of the menagerie. The purple receded magically, and a saved look came into the small eyes beneath the puffy, thick eyelids of the manager of the F. & W.

"Look there!" He pointed a finger in Joan's direction just as she disappeared through the menagerie doors.

"She's going to the bulls! And she's the one that can quiet them if anybody can. She can get them out and she's got the grit to do it, too!"

The clown beside him clutched at his arm.

"Joan Kennerly! My God! She's gone into that den of fright-maddened beasts. And you—you let her!"

Lawson paled, then assurance came back to him.

"Aw! She's only got to crook her little finger at the bulls and they'll walk out from under that flapping canvas meek as lambs!"

"They'll break every bone in her little body!" And with an oath the clown ran down the hippodrome after her.

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"Joan!"

Jerimy Kennerly caught the drenched little figure of his beloved idol to his pounding breast with one throaty, half-sobbed cry.

He was the first to reach her where she stood there on the hill behind the lot, whistling softly to the herd of mammoth beasts that had followed her, and which were pressing close about her, great ears flapping with a remnant of past nervousness, and long, flexible trunks swinging contentedly in the down-pour of rain.

Just how it was that Jerimy reached that weird group first nobody knew, least of all Jerimy. Longshanks said afterwards that he had seen something that looked like the head of the horse department tear out of the pad-room about the time Joan and Ted had made for the

menagerie, and that it had torn its way with cyclonic ferocity across the lighted part of the lot and on into the darkness.

Jeremy himself remembered later that through the driving rain and above the howl of the wind he had heard one last, trumpeting cry, and that it had come to him, after what had seemed hours of tearing this way and that, climbing over the bent bodies of men of the emergency gang, leaping over guy ropes, and calling out hoarsely to his idol, in the direction of the hill.

Now, as he held Joan's slim, rain-drenched figure to him, he found himself stumbling through the only prayer he had ever known—the "now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep" prayer which his mother had taught to a pudgy little Jeremy (who was much too young for skepticism), and which he in turn had taught to Joan.

"I wonder who wished that on me," he muttered, abashed and scornful, growing purplish red under cover of the darkness. Immediately he held Joan off at arms length and boomed at her angrily:

"What d'you think them bulls has got a trainer and a lot of keepers for? Ain't you learned yet, after all these years of intermitten' storms, that bulls is to be kept away from when they're under a flappin' canvas and there's thunder knockin' the daylights out of their tameness? Was you just a-tryin' to get killed?"

Joan spoke a soothing word to a dark hulk behind her that was stretching a menacing trunk toward the booming, blustering Jeremy. Then she turned her childish, rain-wet face back to the man who was holding her so tensely, and whom she could see only when flashes of

lightning lifted the curtain of darkness for an instant.

"Poor old Arkansas Dick! He couldn't get them out, and I——"

"You just two-stepped in and piled all your chips to win agin' them bulls! And you won! But—demmit!" (Jerimy's voice bellowed that it might not sob). "You might of been killed! Ain't you got no consideration for them that loves you, Joie? Ain't you?"

"But there wasn't any danger for me, Uncle Jerry."

"No? I reckon you've got a good-luck charm. Can't nothin' tetch you even when you give it a double dare!"

Joan laughed, freed one hand, and, brushing back a lock of wet bronze hair and patting with actual enjoyment the dripping chiffons that clung to her in all their dejection, without any vestige of their late frou-frou beauty, defended her dear Philip's beasts.

"Joan Kennerly! Joan Kennerly!" came a loud call from the chaotic black which lay between the group on the hill and the lighted lot.

"Present!" called back Joan, through a cold little hand that she held megaphone-fashion to her lips.

Then a crowd was upon them; a crowd of excited, eager, anxious circus folk, headed by a thin-faced little clown and a worried Arkansas Dick.

"Why under the name of Heaven did you risk your life with these bulls?" came a chorus of voices.

"Don't you realize what you did?"

"Don't you remember what they've done to several keepers that have tried to hook them in a storm like this?"

"Did you think that hitting the trail with a lot of mad bulls was a Sunday school picnic?"

"Haven't you——"

"Shut up!" Jerimy Kennerly roared with an unexpectedness that sent a flicker of nervousness under the thick hides of the elephants.

"Cut it! Who do you think you all are, anyway? It's so infernal dark I can't see your maps very plain, but I can squint enough of your fizzyognomies to see that they ain't none of you kinks or presidents or even bosses of a chain-gang, so I don't see no connection between you and that catty-chism that you're a-tryin' to pull off. I reckon Joan Kennerly can do mighty nigh as she pleases, and I *reckon* they ain't nobody that's got any right to holler at her if she should take a notion to go down into the devil's menagerie and bring up a herd of his imps. I jest about figger that she ain't got to listen to no questions from nobody." And Jerimy snapped his fingers defiantly at the faintly visible faces.

Already he had forgotten that *he* had railed at his idol for her act of recklessness. And with a certain dignity he drew Joan's bare, wet arm through one of his own and moved off down the muddy hill.

"Dem this rain!" he muttered in his idol's ear. "You're wet through, and you're li'ble to get——"

"Epizoötic." Joan could not restrain the interjection, which Jerimy scornfully ignored.

"The—a——"

"Distemper!"

"Ain't you a-goin' to let me say what I'm a-wantin' to say? I ain't got no idea who could of wished that gift of chatter on you, Joie. It ain't got no regard for nothin'."

"There, dear old Goosie! What is it I'm going to have? Make it something nice, won't you? Couldn't you make it a plate of ice cream and little pink cakes?"

"I was a-goin' to say you'd catch your death of cold, and that maybe you'd get somethin' on your lungs, but I reckon it won't be much more'n them punk cakes."

"Do you mean *punk* to be the past tense of pink, Uncle Jerry; because if you do I feel that I ought to tell you that pink is an adjective and hasn't tense."

Jeremy came to a sudden and unconscious halt in the very middle of a miniature pond, and at once the water began oozing through his shoes; while Joan splashed her satin-shod little feet about with frank delight.

"Adjective!" Jeremy's voice boomed once more. "What do I know about a adjective? And as for tense——"

"Tense, Uncle Jerry, means time of action. For instance *you* say 'snuk' when you want to show that at some time past you *sneaked* somewhere or other. Notice, please, that *sneaked* and *not* 'snuk' is the past tense of *sneak*."

Jeremy grunted and, drawing her closer to him, moved on again through the rain.

"How about *stick* and *stuck*? Ain't they *two of a kind*?"

"Yes." Joan wondered curiously what was coming.

"Well, then, I reckon 'snuk' is all to the good, too."

Joan bent and passed under the rope which Jeremy held up for her. She laughed softly to herself. She had needed to set Jeremy's worried mind at rest—to set it stewing about something else than herself. Joan loved

Jerimy's speech, just as it was, but at times she had teased him about it when he had needed, as now, to be drawn out of himself.

"Very well, we'll let 'snuk' stand," she offered with apparent magnanimity. "But how about this? You say *thunk* for *thought*. You say 'and then I *thunk*—.' Now *thunk* isn't past tense of think."

Jerimy chuckled.

"Ain't *sunk* the past-whatever-it-is for sink?"

"Yes."

"Ain't *drunk* the past-somethin'-or-ruther for drink?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well then, I guess *thunk* is about the right lay-out for me. And I figger that *blunk* is past for blink. And *brunk* for brink. And if *sung* is past for sing, I reckon *brung* is past for bring. It's just as good as *flung* for fling, and *rung* for ring. Ain't no difference as I can see."

"I understand," laughed Joan as they approached the dressing-tent. "I see that—that you can *sting* and—that I am *stung*." Turning abruptly, she threw her wet arms around his neck and planted a damp little kiss on his seamy cheek.

Then, with a parting laugh, she fled through the door and disappeared beyond the wet and sagging brown canvas sidewall.

Granny Wilson hurried her into dry clothing, while an enthusiastic crowd of women buzzed round her. They chattered together excitedly, and at Joan admiringly.

"Gee! You're some little heroine, aren't you, dear?"

"Some people work so cleverly with the press men! They like——"

"You mean—" clamored several voices as all eyes turned upon Trixie Snyder's pale face.

"Oh, I mean that the chance to do big things seems to favor some lucky persons, and that Joan is one of the lucky."

"That isn't what you meant at all, but it was well said," somebody conceded generously.

"Yes,"—Granny Wilson was drawing off Joan's long wet silk stockings, and she paused a moment for a sweeping glance at the faces above—"Joie'll have a full page in most of the Sunday papers this week, if I'm any judge of our publicity department. Look at her!" as Joan made a *moue*. "Still silly about not wanting to be interviewed." Granny Wilson shook her gray head perplexedly.

"Oh, there'll be a peach of a story all right! Why, that mob in the Big Top went wild when it found out some way—after it had been herded back into its seats—just what had happened!" corroborated some one.

Back in New York Philip Dorset read the accounts of Joan's heroism. The newspapers gave the story but a meager paragraph or two, but the show-world weeklies devoted whole columns to the telling of how "the famous little equestrienne saved the 'Greatest Show on Earth' and an audience of eighteen thousand persons from the dangers of an elephant stampede."

Philip's heart throbbed as he read it with an odd intermingling of fear and pride, and when he had finished he sat a very long time with his face buried in his hands.

When Joan came out of the dressing-room after an hour under Granny Wilson's care and solicitude, the rain had ceased to fall, and a pale moon was peering down

at the lot from the ragged edge of a racing cloud. The wind had gone down soon after the rain had begun, and now a light breeze had risen and was gently rippling the surface of the little ponds of water that, dotting the lot here and there, shone and glittered in the acetylene light.

Joan paused for a moment in the deserted doorway and, lifting her arms to the hurrying, ragged clouds, whispered passionately:

"Storm clouds that frightened his beasts, won't you find him for me? Won't you tell him that I'm *older* now, and that I love him—love him just the same as on that night when he said I was too young?"

Then, dropping her arms a few inches, she let them reach out tenderly toward the northeast, for New York lay in that direction, and somehow New York seemed to be the world.

"Philip, dear! Won't you *ever* want me? Aren't you ever coming back?" Her voice caught in a little sob and her outstretched arms wavered tremblingly. "Oh, Phil, Phil dear, can't you hear me calling to you? Can't you hear me? Can't you feel the loneliness of my heart? It's so tired of waiting for you, Philip, so tired and so heavy, it's 'most—'most like carrying round the strong man's heaviest cannon ball. And I'm not—not very muscular, Philip."

A whimsical smile flitted over her lifted face, but her lovely eyes had a wistful look in their shadowy depths.

She sighed softly and her arms fell listlessly to her sides.

She was gazing sadly out over a dimly lighted corner of the lot when some one touched her gently on the arm.

She started and looked round nervously. It was Longshanks. He was standing just behind her and his eyes seemed to be giving out a message that his lips were unable to speak. He began twisting the ends of the crimson silk sash which draped the trunk of his tights and fell down against his loins. Joan noticed that the silk tights were soiled and torn in places, and she knew that Longshanks had done his share with the emergency gang. She raised her eyes to his, and the mute message looked out at her.

"Longshanks! What is it? Who is it? Who is hurt? Quick! Tell me!"

Joan held her breath and her heart pounded.

"It—it's Blake!"

"Blake!" Joan's heart did not cease to pound. She even wondered that a flood of pity could sweep through it; pity for the man whom she despised, this man whom the storm had laid low.

Longshanks nodded.

"But how—how was he hurt?"

"Center pole in the Big Top."

"Is—is he—*bad*?"

"Afraid so. Skull caved in a bit. Shoulder broken—arm splintered—and internal injuries."

Joan shivered. "Longshanks, how awful! Poor Blake!"

Longshanks gazed down at the sweet, uplifted face, and marveled at the quick sympathy for one who, he felt, was so little deserving of it.

He jerked his head toward the doctor's tent.

"He is conscious and—he wants you, Miss Joan. I came to fetch you."

Almost before the last word had left his lips Joan Kennerly had started across the lot.

Longshanks caught up to her and looking into the lovely, pitying face, was not surprised to find there no fear of nor shrinking from the grim reaper that might be hovering above the man to whom she was going. How unlike all the rest of the girls in the world was this wonderful Joan Kennerly!

CHAPTER XVI

SIDNEY BLAKE CUTS HIS ACT!

BLAKE had overheard the doctor asking Longshanks to find Joan Kennerly and to bring her back with him at once, and his faint pulses had begun to leap and his eyes to watch the door through which Longshanks had disappeared.

Over and over again he whispered to himself:

"She will not come! She will not come!" And then his old egotism would flare up and he would argue: "*Why* wouldn't she come? *You* have sent for her! She will be flattered, even though her proud little spirit may never acknowledge it." And he would smile contentedly, quite satisfied that no woman could withstand such a call; and as he smiled the one good hand that was left to him would make weak, wandering efforts to reach the small black mustache.

But what if she *didn't* come! (The smile would disappear at that, and a hot, feverish look would come into the flat eyes, over which already a film was gathering.) What if he had to die without seeing her just this once more, this one last time! He would try to shake his head at such a pessimistic thought, but the head would not move, and torturing pains shot through it with maddening ferocity.

"More—dope!" he would mutter weakly to the doctor, who sat beside him. The doctor, able to do nothing beyond easing the pain, would give him another hypodermic of morphia.

For a long time now he had been staring at the door with eyes that were failing him. Gray mists were filling the stuffy little tent. They were suffocating him. He had to gasp for breath, and something rattled in his throat hideously when he breathed.

He hoped the mists would clear away before *she* came because he wanted to see her distinctly. He didn't believe in any of that rot about a "hereafter" but—in case—in case there *should* be another—life—after this one—he—would like to carry into it a vision of—*Joan Kennerly*.

He hoped, too, that the rattling in his throat would cease before *she* arrived. It was an ugly, unearthly sound, and he—he hated not being at his best—before *her*. It—it wouldn't be—very attractive to—a woman—that hideous rattle.

He wondered if his hair were much mussed. The doctor had put something heavy and cold against his head. Must be an ice-bag. How silly he must look with an ice-bag on his head!

"Won't you take—that—damned—thing—off my—head?" he asked irritably.

The F. & W. surgeon bent his head to catch the poorly articulated words which came in a voice that was scarcely audible. But the equestrian director's order was not obeyed. There was nothing on his head—nothing but a matted tangle of wet hair from which something red dripped monotonously.

The doctor touched his fingers to the cold, flaccid wrist and glanced anxiously toward the door.

The mists thickened malevolently. Blake tried to speak and found his tongue strangely numb.

A ball of light came through the door suddenly and circled slowly round him. Then quite plainly Sidney Blake felt himself float off into space. Funny! Evidently he'd had this floating power all his life, and only now, when he was shuffling off the mortal coil, passing in his last chips, had he discovered it. Odd, how he could have missed discovering it before. It was so perfectly easy. He had only to wave his arms so, give a leap into the air, and he was off.

To think that he had had such a power, the power to fly, and had never known it until now! What a devil of a lot he had missed! Why, besides the fun he'd have had flying about, imagine what women would have thought of him! And Joan—ah, Joan would have been less capricious. And he would have taken her in his arms and have carried her with him high into space, and she'd have clung to him. Joan—would have——

Then to think what it might have meant to the F. & W.! Why, he'd have been the sensation of the age. And Lawson would have advertised him as the only flying——

“Joan!”

The surgeon beside the cot raised his head at the sound of the feebly spoken name. And there in the door was Joan Kennerly.

Straight as an arrow she came into the tent, and crossed to the cot near the wall. There was no hesitating, no shrinking, no sign of repulsion. Only a sweet, pitying

look in her wide eyes, and gentle solicitude in her outstretched hands.

The mists cleared for a moment, and Blake looked up at her eagerly; and as if in answer to his wish, the rattling in his throat became for the instant less audible.

"Joan!" Then she *hadn't* had that horror of death that other women have! She was just what he had always thought her, *the one woman!*

"Mr. Blake!" Joan did not say "I am sorry!" Joan never did say the usual thing. Besides, she would not waste time now on superfluous words. She must find out what there was that she could do to help him. Maybe he'd want her to take some messages. And maybe—he'd—want her to—pray.

The doctor gave her the seat beside the cot, bowed his head gravely in response to the query in her eyes, and moved away to a shadowy corner.

Joan leaned over the cot anxiously, and her breath brought back to the numbing cheek it fanned the sense of feeling. Little bronze curls touched the dying man's forehead when she put her lips close to his ear and asked:

"Isn't there something I can do for you? Shall I write down any messages?" Her voice was even enough, but a tear splashed onto his temple. Instantly his dull eyes lighted. He even laughed, though none save his own ears heard it.

"Don't weep—for—me—Joan. Don't grieve——" The rattling had grown loud again, and it was *most* annoying. It was a rotten piece of luck that he couldn't make a decent exit when *she* was beside him, looking on. It was hard to lie here before her so infernally mussed up. He'd

always prided himself on being "well groomed," and now—now even his face must be streaked with dirt where it had ground into the sawdust, and of course his tie was awry!

He tried to reach up to adjust his diamond pin, but somehow—queer thing!—he couldn't find his hand. He puzzled about that numb member for a moment; then his wandering mind vacillated back again to his personal appearance.

Maybe, after all, he looked like a fallen gladiator. And gladiators had been heroes to the people of their time. That was it! To be sure. He *was* a hero. Hadn't he fallen in a battle in which he was defending a great audience against panic? He wondered vaguely what would be carved on the monument that was sure to be erected above his tomb. He wondered if *she* would grieve for long; and he wondered about—the—floral offerings. He had never cared much about flowers.

He smiled wanly.

He supposed it was all worth dying for—but—he *had* liked living, and he was still young——

Somewhere off in a distant city was a—a mother! He had never—really forgotten her—only he'd been—too—busy to write. He had had so many things to do. The F. & W. relied so—much. She had—wept, too (just as Joan was weeping), that—time when he—went—away. Only *then* he had just gone out into—the world, and now,—now he—was going—into—eternity. He wished now that—he *had* written oftener. He wished that she could know—how sorry he——

Something was running down his cheeks. His eyes

were all dim with it—whatever it was. Perhaps the mist that had been gathering in the tent had condensed upon his face as he had seen moisture condense on a glass.

He hoped Joan would understand. It would be humiliating—terribly—if she thought he was *crying*.

He raised his eyes with an effort and looked into the sweet face bent so near to his own.

"Joan!" He whispered her name again huskily.

"Tell me," she said, gently touching his cold forehead, where great beads of moisture had gathered, "isn't there someone—some relative or friend to whom you would like me to give a message when you—are——"

"Gone?" Blake rattled the word up at her with a touch of his old bravado. Then for a moment he gasped for breath.

Joan fanned him lightly with the wide straw hat which she took from her head. After a while he looked up once more and tried to smile, but this time the little black mustache remained significantly straight and rigid.

"Yes," he breathed raspingly, "there's a—a—mother in—you'll find address—in letters in—my trunk. Tell her I was—sorry—neglect—her. Do—better—if—had a—another chance."

He coughed weakly, but his flat eyes never left Joan's face, and Joan noticed that they no longer looked hard and ugly. The angel of death had veiled them with a masking film, and tears had softened them. Joan did not even marvel that tears should moisten the eyes of Sidney Blake. For no longer was this wrecked bit of God's handiwork the equestrian director of the F. & W. He was but a human being with life at its lowest ebb.

"There's—something—else. I—I——"

Joan bent nearer to the faltering lips.

"You?" she tried to help him, but he was silent another long moment.

Joan whispered softly:

"You would like me to pray? You—you are—afraid to die?"

"Afraid?" The flat eyes lighted for an instant with a faint remnant of pride. "I am a—*circus-man*! No—circus man—can afford—to—to fear death. No—*real* circus man—is—*afraid*—of it. It is—one of—things—that he——"

"You are wasting your strength," Joan admonished gently. "You must tell me what else I can do for you."

Blake cleared his throat feebly. Something that was gathering there made speech very difficult.

"I—I have——" He paused and with a superhuman effort began again: "You—find—in—trunk—tin box—key—on—watch-chain—your birth cer—certificate. I——"

Joan caught her breath sharply between her small teeth. Her heart seemed to cease its beating, her blood to congeal in her veins. Her beautiful eyes dilated and stared unbelievably at the waxen face on the red-stained pillow.

"You—do—not—believe," the struggling voice went on. "But—that's because—you—do not—know how—much I love you. All—fair—in love—and—war."

"But the—the certificate. You said it was——" Joan interrupted eagerly, breathlessly.

What if—if this that he had said were true, and he should—should die before she had—had learned all there was for him to tell her. What if the mystery of her birth

really lay in this dying man's brain, and—death should come and lock it in there—before she had had time to get it out.

Her slender figure grew rigid, and a convulsive cry went up from her tense young heart.

"I—I wish—you—keep—hand on my—head, while—I tell—. Little hand—makes—every—thing—easier." The husky voice was wistful, and a mute plea came into the dark eyes that were growing ominously blank and glassy.

Joan laid her hand back on the damp brow; she even let her nervous fingers caress it pityingly; but her eyes were fastened commandingly upon the eyes lifted to hers.

Then in his halting, rattling voice Sidney Blake told her how he came into possession of that certificate of her birth. Joan listened, her breath scarcely crossing her parted lips, her sweet face pallid as the waxen one upturned to her.

The sentences were broken and disjointed, but Joan caught at their meaning desperately. Once, when a gasp choked the faltering voice, the doctor came to the cot and placed a small white tablet on the struggling tongue, and again it spoke.

It seemed that Blake had known for years the story of that night in London when Jeremy Kennerly had found the little atom which later he brought with him to the old Farnum circus. It might be that he had overheard the story at some one of those many times when she had insisted upon Jeremy's repeating it to her, or it might be that he had learned it through some channel other than eavesdropping. But in what manner he had learned it

Blake neglected to describe. And Joan was interested only in that part of the story which he chose to relate.

Up to two years ago he had thought little about his information. But at that time Joan had begun to enter womanhood, and he, Blake, had found his heart going mad over her. A year ago he had learned through an intercepted letter that Jerimy Kennerly had been paying sums of money to various detective agencies in London. This made him curious and he had made it his business to learn what lay between Jerimy and those firms across the Atlantic.

After a long time he had learned, from the same source, about the advertisement which had appeared in the London Times, and all about Jerimy's remorse. He had grown interested himself then in the history of the F. & W. idol and last winter, when the show was laid up, he had gone to England and had spent a great deal of time and money (only because he loved her so had he been able to go so far away, when Broadway was calling for both of those things which he spent); and he had accidentally happened upon a clue which had evaded all those brilliant detectives. Perhaps after all it was not due so much to an accident as it was to superiority of intelligence.

At any rate, he had learned that the Joan whom Jerimy Kennerly believed to be descended from noble ancestors was the daughter of a poor curate, whose wife died at Joan's birth!

But he hadn't stopped there. He had meant to come to the idol with all her history on that day when she had promised to become his wife. He had even (would Joan

forgive him, he wondered, when she considered that it was all because he had loved her so?) meant to use his information as a price for her hand. It was to have been the means to an end. But now——

He had learned how a kindly old soul, a member of the curate's flock, who had nursed the wife during that last illness, had believed sincerely that the poor, grief-maddened curate should not be bothered trying to rear a helpless infant when he hadn't any women-folk to help with the task. So she had placed it in a basket and had carried it down to Westminster Bridge. *She had told the curate it had died at birth.*

In some manner, the details of which he had not bothered to learn, she had satisfied the doctor, who made out a death certificate, and the thing had seemed quite settled. But she had not counted on Conscience. And in a few days Conscience had driven her to advertise in the London Times. Just what she would have done had Jerimy Kennerly answered that advertisement she could not have told, for the curate was suddenly ill unto death, and her own house was already far too full of hungry mouths.

But Jerimy hadn't heeded that call. And the little curate had died in less than a month. After that the kindly old soul who had meant so well moved to Wales, and there the story had ended for her.

But Blake had found her and had wormed the confession from her, and had gotten from her a soft little curl which she had cut from the dead mother's head. The curl was bronze and gold and sunset red, and he had worn it here in a locket over his heart.

He had come close to being a villain, hadn't he? He guessed he had been a *near-villain*. But—he was sorry. He hoped——

Joan, her head bent close to the feebly moving lips of the dying man, piecing together his broken sentences, heard the faint rustle of a woman's skirts, and she turned her eyes toward the door expectantly.

There, like an apparition, stood Medea — tall and queenly as the Cleopatra of a dead age, but with a look in her wonderful, velvety dark eyes the like of which Joan had never seen in them before.

With a low cry, Medea flew across the tent and, throwing herself upon her knees beside the cot, burst into a soft, dry sobbing.

Indifferent to the curious eyes of the doctor and the wondering eyes of Joan, oblivious to everything but the bit of human wreckage over which her arms stretched with protecting tenderness, she buried her beautiful, quivering face in the red-stained pillow.

"Medea! Medea dear!" Joan stared at her in amazement. Had she gone mad? Had they both gone mad? Had all the world gone mad? Was all this but an hallucination? Were the words which she had just heard really ever spoken? Had Blake told her that she was——was—the daughter of a curate? Or had she dreamed it all? And Medea, Medea, the cold, proud, well-bred woman——was it really she who was here on her knees beside the death-bed of Sidney Blake? It couldn't be! Why, in all these years she had never seen Blake so much as smile at Medea Tabet, while scores of other men had suffered broken hearts because of her coldness, her unattainable-

ness. It couldn't be! It couldn't be! It was all a mad dream!

"Medea!"

Again she spoke her friend's name, but the beautiful creature bowed low beside her seemed not to hear. Instead, she lifted her head and looked despairingly at the glazed eyes turned so blankly up at her.

"Sidney!" she cried in her low, flute-like voice, "Sidney! My poor Sidney!"

The face on the pillow seemed to glow for one brief moment under its sheen of waxen pallor, and the flat, dark eyes that had grown strangely, ominously dry seemed to moisten with life.

"Who—is—it—please!"

"It's Medea, Sidney." She bent her proud head and with infinite tenderness touched her lips to the chilled brow. "I know you never thought of me like—this—but I—I've always—cared, Sidney. Always, from the very first."

Joan, staring down at these two people—so directly antithetic to each other—found something weirdly odd and uncanny in the fact that nature could put love in the heart of such a woman as Medea for such a man as Sidney Blake had been.

What, indeed, is so great an enigma as the heart of a woman!

Blake coughed, a dry, rattling cough. He gasped in a quick, suffocating way; ceased; then gasped again chokingly.

The doctor hastened to the bedside and laid his sensitive finger-tips on the inert wrist.

Joan stood now a little way from the cot, having given her place to Medea, and gazed at the scene like one in a nightmare.

The doctor removed his fingers.

Medea glanced up at him with tragic beseeching. But he shook his head gravely.

"I can do nothing. It is the end!"

There came a low, strangling cry from the woman on her knees. She fell to kissing the cold cheeks that already were sunken.

"Sidney! My darling! My darling!"

A pale phantom of the old Blake flared up satirically in the all but empty shell of the man. The stiffening lips smiled, the corners of the little mustache lifted feebly, the dull eyes tried pathetically to move.

"I—I'm not—sur—prised. —Always—was—a—devil among—the—ladies—" He paused. Then:

"Joan!"

Joan Kennerly sprang to his side.

"I am here beside you." Her voice trembled beyond control, and he caught joyously at the tears in it.

"Joan!" he whispered wistfully. Then once more the lips straightened significantly. A little convulsive sigh slid through them. His eyes stared blankly at the fluttering canvas overhead.

"Time—to—cut—the—act. Time—for—the—finish. Sorry—Joan! Was always—a—devil with—the—ladies. Will—write—oftener— Tell—her—will—write—oftener."

"Joan!" It was but little more than a sigh.

And so he ended his act, the name of one woman on

his lips, the head of another on his motionless breast, and the unconscious figure of a tempestuous little lion tamer lying face down near the door, where she had fallen but a moment before without so much as a cry.

Poor, pompous little equestrian director! Who is there that would say he was all bad? Who, indeed! when even the girl whom he had wronged by those months of silence during which he had held the story of her birth in his heart went from that tent with hot tears streaming unchecked down her lovely face?

CHAPTER XVII

A FATHER AT LAST

AT the door, when she had seen the doctor lifting the limp figure of the little lion tamer from the carpet of rough, sharp cinders, Joan had paused and laid a pitying hand on the pale, unconscious face of the Spanish girl; and this time she did not even wonder that such a man as had been that bit of lifeless clay which now lay stark and still on the cot behind her could be the object of love. She had ceased to marvel, even to think.

"Poor Zetta!" Her voice trembled and she made no effort to control it. "Poor little Zetta! But he smiled admiration to-night when you conquered your beasts—that will be something for you to—to remember—something to soothe your torn little heart! Poor little Zetta! Poor Medea!"

She stood for an interval outside the door, filled with a dazed sense of having received joyous news which later had been dwarfed into insignificance by the work of the sweeping scythe of that grim reaper, Death. She felt a vague gladness in her awed heart, and it puzzled and shamed her. She recalled dimly that a great thanksgiving seemed to have filled it suddenly to overflowing just before that awesome Presence had stilled that other heart. Even now, now when that thrilling gladness had been

superseded by the sorrowful thought of the rigid, empty husk of what had once been a living, breathing, animated being, there still remained a strange, new peace far down beneath the troubled tears.

She stood there in the midsummer night silhouetted against the weather-stained, wet canvas of the little tent by the pale moonlight which seemed to bathe her in a glory of opalescent radiance, groping through the haze that enveloped her until she found her way back to the story that had so filled her with that ineffable joyousness.

It came to her suddenly like the bright light of a ship breaking its way through a fog at sea.

She was not a spurious nobody without legal right to live! She was not the abandoned offspring of a woman who had no right to conceive!

She had been licensed—even christened! Her mother had been a noble woman who had given her life that she, her child, might live! And her father! Her father had been a curate! A minister of the holy gospel!

“Reverend Kennerly!”

She whispered the name softly, proudly, and her moist, gold-flecked eyes lifted and gazed at the last of the scurrying clouds. Then involuntarily she clasped her two little hands above her head and added reverently:

“Mother! My darling, *right-to-be*, angel mother!”

Out across the lot the swift-moving machinery of the F. & W., the crews of well-trained men, were razing the city of nomads. Canvas was being lowered. Gaunt, bare poles were being piled onto waiting wagons. A pachyderm was pushing the wagons about with as much ease as if they had been perambulators, its great, ponderous

head pressed against the painted end-boards, its trunk swinging rhythmically.

More poles—center poles, peak poles, and quarter poles—were coming down without regard to where they struck. The creaking of ropes and the groaning of tackle mingled with the shouting of men. Now and then came the whinny of a horse whose hours of work had just begun, or the tinkling laugh of a woman on her way to the Pullman sleeper—a woman whose hours of work had just ended.

The Big Top still fluttered its canopy against the sky, but Joan could hear the familiar crash and clatter that came from inside it. Men were ripping up the seats and stages, piling up the wooden ring-banks, and taking down the aerial riggings, the crane bar, the flying rings and trapeze, and the acetylene gas fixtures. In another moment they would be "striking" the tent, and after that—there would remain but tan-bark and sawdust to mark the spot where an hour or two ago was so much life and action, so much laughter and fright, so much agility and daring!

The shadowy figure of the doctor slipped silently past her. Groups of whispering phantoms came and went from the tent behind her. A dry, incessant moaning in the muffled, grief-wrung voice of her dearly beloved friend—whose secret, unrequited love no one had ever guessed—sounded in her ears. The light breeze flapped the sidewalls and canopy drearily. From some nearby tree came the mournful cry of a hoot owl. A cricket at her feet chirped plaintively.

"Oh! To think that with all this tragedy about me—

I cannot be entirely—*miserable!*” Joan burst forth remorsefully, beating the fist of one little hand into the palm of the other. “To think that I can have thought of myself in an hour like this. To think that I——”

The voice of Jerimy, who had approached unobserved at her right, interrupted her self-arraignment.

“Don’t, Joie!”

Joan turned with a glad little cry and threw herself into Jerimy’s outstretched arms.

“Had a bunch of trouble handed to you, honey? Tell yours truly all about it, and maybe he can eeradicate it. He might even remove from the globe the big stiff that doled it out to you, whoever he be!”

He patted her shoulder tenderly, the rough skin of his short, square-tipped fingers catching on the soft silk of her white blouse and snagging its satiny surface; his massive head, with its bristling, grizzled hair, bending solicitously above the small bronze one on his great breast, the ruddy neck wrinkling into loose folds beneath his chin; the bluish, oddly seamed lips touching ever so softly the riotous, fragrant hair that brushed across them like lightest fairy fingers; the faded blue eyes peering out from under their thatched brows fixed unblinkingly upon the door of the tent just a few feet away; his mighty shoulders squaring ominously.

Joan moved her head slowly from side to side, pressing her face so tight to the protecting breast that the small pearl buttons in the pleat of the lavender shirt front sank deep into the tender flesh of her cheeks.

“Nobody’s done anything to me, Uncle Jerry—nobody but—God!”

Jerimy's wondering eyes came away from the tent door and looked down at Joan for an instant in puzzlement.

"He ain't—done nothin' to hurt you, has He?" he asked awkwardly. Somehow he never could feel quite at home on this subject which Joan handled with such "matter-of-courseness." There didn't seem to be nothin' you could say about God, unless you said it swearin' or prayin', and there wa'n't nobody that knowed more about the former and less about the latter than him. And whenever him and Joie got to discussin' what she called the "Deity," he always had to watch his P's and Q's or he'd like as not stick a swear word in front of Him or right behind Him. And he'd a durned sight ruther bite his cussed old tongue out than to insult her "Deity." And anyway, 'twan't *exactly* comf'rtable to take "His name in vain," even if you knowed that you didn't believe in Him. There was always the chanc't that there was somethin' to it all. And lately—well, the fact that Joie believed in Him ought to be *proof enough for anybody!*

"Oh, Uncle Jerry! He's made me sorrowful and glad, happy and sad, all at the same time!"

Jerimy puckered his wrinkled old lips thoughtfully and raised respectful eyes to the star-dotted sky.

Demmit! If He had such power as that, there wa'n't much doubt but that He was as great as she always said He was!

"'Pears like as if your sadness was a heap more'n your gladness, honey Jo. You're a wettin' up my harness some, with your little sprinklers. Ain't you a-goin' to tell me about it?"

Joan nodded her head against the lavender shirt front.

"But the tears are not all—sorrow tears," she said almost contritely. "Some of them are joy tears. I—I'm afraid, Uncle Jerry, that *most* of them are—the—the joy ones."

Then between little punctuating sobs, she told Jerimy Kennerly all that had happened.

Jerimy's heart sank low within him as he listened to the story of that memorable advertisement in the London Times, and again and again he whispered into the fragrant hair near his lips:

"Now she'll despise me, same as she would any cheatin' thing that come acros't her path! Now she'll—hate me like pizen. And she ought. They ain't no reason why she shouldn't. She'll figger out that she'd of had some kin-folks all these years, or even if they was all dead at least she'd of knowed who she was. Now she'll hate me! Hate me like Hell!

"I guess I better look round for a nice place to die in, 'cause I ain't a-goin' to—live 'thout her. I ain't even a-goin' to *try*. 'Tain't worth tryin' for! I'll just find six foot of ground some place that ain't busy, and a gun that ain't workin' and I'll go to sleep a-hopin' that if they is a God, He'll just let me spend them few billion years that He tells of a-dreamin' about my—little—Joie—the little Joie that clumb into my sloppy old heart that night in London, and cooed up into my ugly old mug, jest as if it was the face of the handsomest matinee idol in the world. I jest want to spend them years a-dreamin' about my little Joan, that never asked nothin' about me, but jest took me as I was, and let on that there wa'n't nobody else in the world that was half as nice; my Joie,

that grewed up under my very eyes—that I learned to walk and to talk; my Joie, that ain't never acted sorry for what she done that night in London; my little Joie, that—ain't—never—been nothin' but—a angel!

"If He'll let me dream about her I won't mind—so much—a-havin' to plug a little lead into the empty garret under my hat. Though it's a-goin' to hurt—to hurt—like—*Hell* when I take my last—look at—her face, and listen my last listen to—her voice. It's a-goin' to——"

Joan lifted her head and looked up into the drawn, seamy face above her.

"And now," she finished, "I—I want to go down to the car and cry. I—I want terribly to cry, Uncle Jerry."

Jerimy's mind groped its way back to earth. He caught at her words and filtered them through his aching brain. Sense and coherence came out of them, and he smiled down at her with an effort at raillery.

"What'd you call that what you jest been a-doin' all over my shirt front?"

A glimmer of a smile swept over Joan's vivid lips.

"Why, that was only weeping, Uncle Jerry. And weeping is all right to carry off grief, but you have to *cry* when you've got so much joy." She pursed her lips for his good night kiss.

When Joan had moved off across the lot to join a group of women who were on their way to the cars, Jerimy Kennerly looked after her achingly.

"Poor little Joie! She couldn't bear to tell me that she's done with me. She snuggled up in my arms jest as if I hadn't never robbed her. And all the time she must of been shrinkin' from me inside. I reckon she

won't never be able to step on the insect that's stung her. She's apt to go on a-tryin' to stand for me jest 'cause she can't bear to hurt nothin'. And *she'll* suffer by havin' to pretend that it's all right.

"Am I a-goin' to let her sacrifice herself for a old gink like me? Am I? Demmit! If I am, then I ain't worth the gunpowder to blow me up."

After a prolonged pause:

"And to think that jest a plain curate—whatever that is—had the nerve to be the father of *her*! He must a been pretty crazy about hisself to grab that honor when they was a whole gang of Dooks and Lords and other blooded gents that'd 'a given their eyes to have her.

"Curate! What'd *he* ever do to make him get the job of bein' the father of *her*? If he'd of been the guy that built the pyramids, or even the boob that *discovered* 'curates,' he'd of been *somebody* in the Blue Book, and his bein' the father of *her* wouldn't seem so much like downright gall! But jest a plain curate—that was cast iron nerve. Wonder what he ever *cured*. Must of been somethin' worth while, anyway, or they wouldn't of called him a 'cure-it.'"

Jerimy pulled at his bushy left eyebrow thoughtfully. Suddenly his face cleared and he slapped his thigh exultantly.

"If I hadn't had a solid ivory bean I'd of knowed that Joan's curate father was a gent that'd cured the kink of somethin', and got hisself titled.

"And if he was that smart—that he could cure a kink—I reckon he was smart enough to get the job of bein' Joie's father, and that he deserved it. I guess smartness

is about as great as Dookness, anyhow. Well, I always knowed that Joan wasn't just common clay like the rest of us. I always knowed that she was a *lady*."

Once more the bristling brows lowered and the square, ruddy face clouded.

"God! How she's a-goin' to hate me when she realizes that I robbed her of the right to know who she was just 'cause I was selfish and was afeard of losin' her. I'd ruther never see her again than to see her look at me with hate in her eyes. I'd ruther jest blow out!"

He thrust his two short, stubby thumbs under his elastic braces, and lifting his shaggy head blinked at the moon through a disconcerting mist. After a time he shook his head mournfully but with a certain pathetic emphasis.

"No—I ain't a-goin' to let my little Joie hurt herself a-savin' me. I'll go away. I'll take a last look at her and light out—'thout tellin' her—that it's *good-bye*."

He paused and drew a rough sleeve across his blinking eyes. "'Tain't as if I didn't deserve it. I—I reckon I'm jest gettin' what's a-comin' to me. But—she's been mine—my little Joie—for so long! She's been——

"Hell! If you don't shut up on that line of meller-drammer talk, Jerimy Kennerly, you'll be doin' a sob stunt. Ain't you got no dignity? You sure get my goat, Kennerly, with your cussed Bertha M. Mudd sentiments. I'd not be took back none to find you some day a-weepin' on Lawson's shoulder about the sad fate of Pauline in her perils."

With a scornful snap of his fingers he strode off, head rigidly erect; but under his breath he was whistling softly an uncertain bar of "Home, Sweet Home."

CHAPTER XVIII

BUD

THE day after the storm one of the F. & W. lawyers opened Sidney Blake's trunk, and Joan sought and found the address of his mother, the little locket which he had sometimes worn, and that document which meant so much to her—the certificate of birth which registered the name of an honored wife—a *legalized* mother!

With that profound reverence which comes to us for one who has died, Joan touched the personal effects of Sidney Blake; and if a hateful memory sped unbidden across her mind, bringing with it a moment of repugnance, it was followed at once by a wave of contrition. There could be no resentment where there was so much awe; for to Joan, Death was the vehicle that carried one into lands of mystery, that took one over the border of doubt and wondering into knowledge and the secrets of life. It answered all questions, solved all problems. It was omnipotent!

To her, Sidney Blake had become immortal. He had passed into everlasting life. He had gone from ignorance into knowledge. He was now in possession of the key to the Great Mystery. That in itself set him far apart from the man he had been in life. In some vague way it

had purified whatever part of him had been corrupt. Thus Sidney Blake through Death had come closer to Joan Kennerly than ever he could have come in life.

"I reckon there isn't anything in the world," Joan said to Jerimy a few moments after she had come with bowed head from the car where was the late equestrian director's trunk, "which means so much as the—the kind of birth certificate that proves one's *right* to be alive. It seems to make everything on earth more moral, beginning with—with one's mother."

She held up the prized document of her birth, and in her eyes, where a moment ago had been so much awe, there was the glint of sunlit jewels.

Jerimy looked at the document held up before him, and he swallowed a bit of smoke that he had sucked through the yellow stem of his cheap, foul-smelling pipe. He coughed boisterously and taking the pipe from his mouth, rapped it briskly against the side of a car. A red ash fell to the cinders at his feet where it glowed faintly. He placed the sole of a heavy boot upon it, ground out the spark of life, then nodded his great head emphatically.

"No, they ain't nothin' better'n that kind of a stifficate, less'n it's a marriage one." A little light flared up in the faded eyes as they turned toward the direction in which lay New York. "To-morrow!" he whispered to himself. "*To-morrow!*"

Joan patted his arm gently and pressed her cheek to it.

She looked back across her shoulder as they moved away from the cars, and her face grew sad.

"There's another important certificate, Uncle Jerry, one that we get only at the end. Sidney Blake has just—

got his." Then after a pause, during which they reached the depot platform and the taxi which was to convey them to the new lot:

"Zetta has declared that she will sit in her animal cage when it's in parade to-day. I—I wish you'd see Lawson, Uncle Jerry, and tell him."

That night Joan lay stretched in a steamer chair just outside the dressing-room door, all ready to "go on" when the number came for her act, her chiffon draperies covered by a long silk shawl upon which Granny Wilson had insisted, and her wooden shoes on the ground beside her, when Trixie Snyder came out of the dressing-room shyly followed by her mother. Trixie came to a halt not a yard from Joan's chair, and the Little Mother stopped, too, quite automatically.

A cool night wind had risen with the setting sun, and now it was tugging at the guyed-down tent-tops with pretended viciousness. It fluttered the brown sidewalls of the dressing-tent, flapped the skirts of the Little Mother and billowed the cape that hung from Trixie's shoulders.

With infinite tenderness the Little Mother drew the billowing pink satin garment closer about her daughter's figure. Her thin fingers trembled against the girl's smooth, bare breast for one brief instant; then they fluttered to her sides like frightened moths.

"You're all aquiver again, aren't you? Still worrying about—*him?*" Trixie's voice was filled with biting scorn.

The Little Mother forced a soft, mirthless laugh.

"No, Trixie. I ain't worried none, now that Joe's watchin' out for him. There couldn't nothin' happen to

you now, darling, s'long as Joe and me is a-lookin' out to keep him away from you. Besides"—her dull, work-dimmed eyes sought the scornful blue ones, and in the acetylene light that flickered and flared about them the scorn lost much of its sting; for to the Little Mother those blue eyes bent upon her looked unusually soft—" 'tain't as if a barking dog ever bites." She laughed again, and this time there tinkled through her laughter a note of pretended gaiety.

But the tinkling, timid little note did not ring quite true, and to Joan, sitting an arm's length away, the tinkling was not gay at all; it was only plaintive. She noticed how nervously the gray head turned when suddenly from the shadows behind a stake wagon that loomed big and black off at the right there came the unmistakable sound of crunching cinders. She noticed, too, the quick stiffening of the frail little body, silhouetted against the pale, uncertain light.

Always Joan had been sorrowfully conscious of the antagonism which smouldered in Trixie's heart toward herself, though there had been times when a hot sense of injustice and a blinding anger had almost burned up the sorrowfulness and regret. But never until recently had she thought of that antagonism seriously. Of late she had found Trixie staring at her at odd times and in an odd way—a way which, for some reason, sent a shiver down her spine. For days now she had laughed at a vague premonition, an oppressive foreshadowing of an approaching *something* that was to affect her vitally, only to find that her ridicule could not drive it away. This thing that was casting its shadow before haunted her per-

sistently, followed her grimly, tenaciously, until she grew to expect it hourly, and almost with impatience.

There were but two mediums through which this thing that pressed its occult warning upon her could hurt her—Jerimy and Philip! And it was for them Joan trembled, the while she laughed at her silly fears.

But Trixie neither mocked at her own fears nor jested about them, though even to herself she would scarcely have acknowledged their existence. She had heard quite distinctly that crunching of cinders behind the stake wagon, and her flesh had gone a little cold. But—she argued mentally—just because the cinder-strewn plot over there in that shadowy corner happened to be out of the orbit of the performers during a “show” was no reason why one of the property men or a member of the stake or canvas crew could not have wandered across it.

Obediently her heart took up its normal gait, and she gazed coldly down at the gray head still poised in its alert attitude of listening.

“What a little coward you are! Afraid of your shadow just because a big bluffer who used to be your son-in-law and a second-rate perch balancer has been seen hanging round the lot in the last three towns! Little *coward!*” There was cold contempt in her voice and words, and little Mrs. Mason’s head sank until her chin rested upon her shrunken breast.

All was silent now on the cinder plot at their right, and the Little Mother’s fears seemed temporarily allayed. She turned her faded eyes once more to the sawdust path that lay between the Big Top and the dressing-tents.

A number was just going on, and several belated mem-

bers of it scurried excitedly past, calling out a word or two as they ran; and then again Trixie and her mother stood alone in the acetylene light but little more than a yard's length from Joan's steamer chair, the spectral patches of shapeless white and the sinister objects of shadowy black before their watchful eyes, the muffled music of the band and the monotonous flapping of canvas in their listening ears.

"You know," the Little Mother began timidly, after a long interval of silence, "what Bud said he'd do some day, and you know, too, that there ain't nothin' he'd stop at. He—he's after you, Trixie! After all these months of crouching low and quiet, he's getting ready to spring."

Trixie shivered and glanced furtively across her shoulder to where the stake wagon loomed menacingly black against the starry, moonlit sky. Then she turned anxiously toward the entrance of the men's dressing quarters. At once her taut nerves went loose, and the drooping corners of her carmined lips lifted in a relieved smile.

"She's been worrying again, Joe," she called out to a man who was approaching them.

The acetylene gas and the pale moon made a Greek god of the long-limbed young man in the pink tights who swung up beside them, and there was a kind of possessive pride on the face Trixie raised to his.

"She's been worrying something awful, Joe, and I guess we'll have to hire a few of the stake-and-chain crew to keep Bud from getting inside the ropes any more, or else we'll be having a sick mother on our hands. She's such a helpless, scarey thing, is Muzzie."

There was no hint of contempt in the clear voice now,

no note of anger or of impatience; there was naught but a fluty, silken tenderness.

The Little Mother fumbled apologetically with the hooks of her daughter's cape, and her gray head bent a little under a flood of guilt and shame. It seemed so absurd to be a coward when such a splendid specimen of manhood as Joe stood ready to protect her girl with his very life if need be.

She looked up at him shyly.

"I—I thought I saw something moving stealthy-like behind that stake wagon a minute ago and—and—you know what Bud swore he'd do to Trixie some day, 'specially if she ever considered marrying again. And now I s'pose he's heard about her and you. He—he's a bad man, Joe. He wouldn't stop at nothin'—honest he wouldn't. Once Trixie heard him say that if he ever had to kill anybody he'd do it in some way that'd leave no clue."

She looked at Joe beseechingly.

"I guess I'm just a mite nervous sence my stomick has been troubling me, but I can't help it, Joe, honest I can't. She's my girl, my baby! She come to me out of my soul and my body and—and Joe, I can't bear that anything should threaten *her*. If 'twas me as Bud was after I wouldn't be a mite scared. Now that she's got you to take care of her she don't need me much." The dim brown eyes rested wistfully for a second on Trixie's smiling face; then, catching her breath the Little Mother went on, "and I—I guess you and her could spare me the same way the public spared me when I got so crippled up I couldn't work the traps no more. But when it's my girl,

my baby girl he's a-goin' to hurt, Joe,—I—I—" Her voice trailed off in a stifled sob and her thin hands worked spasmodically.

Joe's eyes were moist, but he laughed easily and, catching the frail little woman up with a muscular arm, held her tenderly close to him.

"Why, you scared, timid little rabbit! What you saw over there was some rubber-neck boob doing the usual stunt of sneaking under the ropes and making friends with the shadows around the ladies' dressing-room. Ain't that so, honey?" He turned to the girl, who stood silent beside them.

She nodded and smiled up at him.

He reached out a free arm and drew her within its protecting circle while the Little Mother struggled vainly to touch her small, clay-stained, cinder-torn shoes to the ground.

"You're always kidding, Joe," she ventured, half reproachfully. "You ought to be serious 'bout this matter of Bud being seen a-hanging round the lot ever sence we left Naperville."

Joe set her down gently and, putting a big index finger under her chin, lifted the small worried face and gazed into it unsmilingly.

"I am serious about it, Little Mother. Ain't Trixie all I've got, just as much as she's all you've got? Well, you can bet your last red cent that Bud can't ever hurt our Trixie so long as he comes out in the open, like a man, to do it. I can manage him."

"I guess you could do it all right, Joe; only you see Bud ain't the kind that'll give you a chance. He won't

come out in the open. He'll spring when you ain't a-looking, Joe, and in a way you ain't expecting." The quavering voice was apologetic, but the dim eyes held warning and reproach; reproach, albeit ever so gentle, for the man-love that cannot scent danger as can the mother-love.

"I'm telling you, Joe," she reiterated timidly, "I'm telling you that Bud'll spring when you ain't a-looking, and in a way you ain't expecting."

Trixie shrank a bit closer to the stalwart figure of the man who declared himself her protector, and again she shivered as her involuntary glance took in the shadowy thing that loomed gigantically, *forebodingly*, against the night at their right.

"Muzzie and I are such cowards, Joe! I don't know what we'd do if we didn't have you to look after us." She looked with well assumed shyness into the manly face bent above her. "Poor Muzzie, she'll just naturally drop dead the first time she bumps into him. I wish, Joe, that you'd tell her not to stay out here on the lot alone during our act. I'm worried to have her out here hanging around the padroom just to watch our old stunts. Why, there's been lots of nights when I got nervous in my act just because I thought something might happen to her out here alone. Bud knows how helpless we are, *especially Muzzie*, and he knows if he should come around either one of us we'd turn and run like mad; though poor Muzzie couldn't run much now, but she'd try hard—"

She paused as her trained ear caught the sound of their cue.

"Number nine is over! Come on, Joe, we're on," and

freeing herself from the arms that held her, Trixie hastened toward the padroom.

Joe followed her with his long, easy stride, calling back over his shoulder to the Little Mother:

"Don't watch us to-night, Muzzie. Stay in the dressing-room where you'll be safe from—shadows—until we are through."

CHAPTER XIX

THE LITTLE MOTHER OPENS THE LION CAGE

THE little woman left behind made no answer. There seemed none to be made. For years she had stood in the padroom during a part of each show and gazed through the wide doors of the Big Top at the center ring where her daring, blue-eyed Trixie did her hair-raising stunts on the elevated end of a long, balanced perch-pole.

For years she had stood there near the doors for the mere purpose of looking on at the act, her heart in her throat from the instant Trixie, slim and girlish, shinned her way up the long pole held upright and carefully balanced by Joe or his predecessor, until the end of the act where she waved an American flag to the thrilled sea of faces and then slid down to the sawdust and—safety.

For years she had stood there and looked on, fear gripping her heart; for, despite the girl's skill and the certain security that had come from long training, there was always the danger of a fall; the danger that lurked thirty feet below, where there was not even a net, where there was nothing but clay, hard as rock, with but a four-inch covering of sawdust.

Why, then, should she stay behind in the shelter of the dressing-tent to-night of all nights; to-night, when a

double danger menaced the dear flesh of her flesh?

She clasped her hands to her breast and prayed unconsciously as she stumbled through the dew-wet sawdust to her accustomed place in the half darkness at the left of the wide doors.

Joan gazed after her pityingly until the shadows of the padroom had closed round the frail, bent little figure; then she lifted her eyes to the star-dotted sky and fell to wondering why the fates so juggled things. Here was Trixie Snyder with a real, *living* mother, yet wanting one so little; and here was she, with not even memory of the mother that was in Heaven, and wanting that mother so passionately.

In the padroom the Little Mother pressed close to the heavy canvas sidewall and stared through the wide doors into the arena. A clown, making his exit, struck her arm playfully with an inflated bladder, but she was unaware of the contact. His chalked face stretched into a ridiculous grimace, and he paused a moment to say:

"A fine lot of gelders in there! They're a lot of two-for-fives, and they don't know good stuff. But Full-house Lannigan is going big, with his ancient stunt of slap-sticks, and the old steam roller and jitney 'bus is doubling them over their late dinner like Rip Van Winkles that have never seen anything funny, not even a laugh producer that's old enough to be Oslerized. They've just woke up."

The white-clad figure of the clown strode on. The Little Mother had neither seen nor heard.

A troupe of acrobats hurried past her. A woman in a long spangled cape laid her ring-laden fingers on the

thin arm pressed so tightly against the sidewall, whispered a genial word, and was gone. A couple of tardy gymnasts shut off for an instant her view of the center ring, then disappeared down the tan-bark hippodrome. Professor Humphrey, the new equestrian director (until last night Sidney Blake's assistant), stuck his silk-hatted head through the wide doors in quest of some belated artist, and remarked confidentially:

"That Kelly girl is always late, regardless of fines."

Then came a petite figure in a gold-embroidered Mandarin coat, who, despite the new equestrian director's black frown and imperious gesture, paused for one brief instant to call out a quick word of good-fellowship to the Little Mother.

But the Little Mother neither saw nor heard any of these things. Her dull brown eyes stared unwaveringly at the center ring, while Joe's last words kept repeating themselves over and over again in her ears: "Stay in the dressing-room where you'll be safe from—*shadows!*"

Stay in the dressing-room, safe from—shadows, while Trixie, her little girl, was out here in the Big Top, a glistening target of pink tights and spangles? Not even a beast mother would seek shelter from—shadows when her cub was in the open!

Target!

The word came back to her. She cast it aside and sought brighter thoughts.

Target! A pink and spangled target! Again the word crept into her brain insidiously. She pushed it aside and snatched desperately at scraps of mental driftwood as they floated past her.

It was a "big house." The wind had gone down and the night was growing sultry and close. Perhaps it would storm about midnight. If only there would not be another squall!

The sudden tattooing of a snare drum sounded like a rifle in a shooting gallery, and Trixie, shinning her way to the top of the perch-pole, which Joe held and balanced so perfectly, was a pink and spangled—*target!*

All those faces that were visible through the patch of doorway were turned toward the center ring. Perhaps Bud's face was one of them! Would he dare enter the Big Top? Would he?

A sudden feeling of certainty that he was near came upon the little woman crouching there in the shadowy padroom.

Terror seized her. She caught convulsively at the canvas sidewall. Her body stiffened, her throat became hot and dry, her hands cold and damp.

Trixie, her girl, was in danger!

Her burning eyes fixed themselves in fascinated horror on the slender figure in pink silk tights and myriads of glistening spangles that had reached the end of the perpendicular pole, and there, near the sagging canvas top, was swinging out over space like a reed swayed by the swift current of a river; while a pretty face smiled down through a network of aerial rigging.

A wild impulse came upon her to run into the ring and call out to Trixie, above the blare of the band, to come down, quick! Quick!

She dropped her hand from the sidewall and made a movement to go. Then her heart seemed to stop! A

chill crept up her spine. Cold perspiration came out upon her forehead!

Something was here, just behind her! She felt it, heard it in the silence as one hears the approaching storm in the dead quiet that precedes it.

Was it—was it one of Zetta's lions, that in some way had got loose, or was it—was it Bud? If only it was one of Zetta's lions! If only—it was—a lion!

Slowly and with difficulty the Little Mother turned her head.

It was Bud!

Bud, leering at her through the shadows. Bud, with his hard, drug-lighted eyes and his cadaverous, sinister face!

The Little Mother tried to speak, but her tongue clove to the dry roof of her mouth.

The man who had once been her daughter's husband laughed softly.

"Same old coward, ain't you? Well"—he came a step nearer, leaned against a rear wheel of the lion wagon, and bent his lean face toward her threateningly—"you never had cause to be scared before, but by G—! you've cause to-night."

The gray-haired woman stared at him in dumb terror. Back of her, beyond the big doors, was the being who meant more to her than life. Like one who is drowning, a million visions flitted swiftly before her. She saw Trixie's doll-like face smiling, through a maze of aerial rigging, at the throngs of people beneath her; she saw the slender body, held off from the pole by two bare, rigid arms; she saw the slim limbs wind themselves round

the pole, the bare arms drop from it, and the body, bending at the waist, lean slowly backward and downward until the golden head touched the heels of the pink satin slippers; then she saw—a shapeless heap of pink and silver *motionless in the sawdust below*.

A convulsive tremor crept over her, freeing her voice from her parched throat.

"Bud! Bud!" she cried, catching his arm in her excited grasp, "Bud, you wouldn't hurt her! You wouldn't, Bud! I—I know you wouldn't! You're just kidding, ain't you? You couldn't—really—hurt—nobody, Bud. You ain't really bad. And she's been your wife—and—and—Don't you remember that night out in Troy, Kansas, when—when the—baby came and we thought she—was dying, and you—you cried then, Bud, do you remember?"

She held to his arm tenaciously, despite his efforts to shake her off; and when he would have interrupted she held his bright eyes with her dull, faded ones, and went on breathlessly:

"You cried and you put your head on my breast. It was storming, you remember, Bud? And the rain beat against the windows of our sleeper, out there on a side track at the edge of the town, while the show doctor and the doctor of Troy worked over her all that long night. And Bud—Bud! when they brought that little red flannel bundle and placed it in your arms you just couldn't look at it for your tears, and you give it to me and went outside; and there, in the early dawn, I saw you kneel on the wet grass beside the tracks."

Never before in all her life had the Little Mother been possessed of so much eloquence. She went hurriedly on,

still clinging with superhuman strength to the man, who made futile efforts to shake her off.

"You knelt there in the wet, Bud, and you never cared who saw. You was all white and trembling, and I come and tried to make you to go to your berth and get some rest. Remember, Bud? But you didn't pay no attention. You stayed there until our girl sent for you, and then you come into the car and sank down beside her bed and buried your face in the bed-clothes. Can't you remember exactly how she put out her poor, weak little hand and laid it on your head? And when she whispered your name, wasn't her voice just like a voice coming from another world? Wasn't it?

"Bud"—she smiled bravely at him now, through the blood that had rushed to her hot, dry eyes—smiled almost tenderly, in her desperate effort to resurrect in him a remnant of his once decent manhood—"do you remember the village grave-yard where we buried the little bundle that was yours and *hers*? It was in the very next town, on a green hillside overlooking the river. It was such a tiny box they put it in that you insisted on carrying it from the car to the place in your arms. Do you remember? Bud, that day——"

For a moment—one brief moment—the man's drug-lighted eyes ceased to leer and a far-away look came into them; but the change was short lived. He shrugged his shoulders heavily, like one awakening from a dream. Then a sudden fury seemed to seize him. That he could have been moved so deeply, even for so transient a time, appeared to fill him with a mad, unreasoning passion.

With a vile oath he flung off the fingers that had re-

laxed their clutch on his arm and took a quick step toward the big doors. He looked back at her angrily.

"Do you think you can juggle with my feelings and make me forget what I'm here for? If you do, you've got another think coming. I'm not going to be side-tracked by any old woman's chatter, not as long as I've got my little joker in my pocket. I'm going to give a show here to-night myself. I'm going to give the ginks in there a hair-raising thriller. They're all hoping that something'll happen to somebody so they can have the tragedy to lick their chops over for the next six months. They want to see something that'll curdle their blood, and I'm the little boy that's going to oblige them."

He laughed again, softly. It was the low, chuckling laugh of a madman; a hollow, mirthless laugh that brought goose flesh to the surface of the Little Mother's body.

Still chuckling, his narrow head thrust forward from his shoulders, his straw hat tilted with an air of defiance over one yellow, waxen ear, he gazed through the slits of his half-closed eyelids at the center ring where, high in the air, was the scintillating figure of a girl.

"Same little old kid! Same little old hair-raiser! Look at her one arm work! She's going big, all right, but just wait for her finish! Her *finish* when she'll make the hit of her life. A real hit! A hit that'll be her last!" He had turned his back to the Little Mother, and now he edged nearer the stream of light that poured through the wide doors.

The Little Mother gasped, and her heart sank. She flung herself in his path.

"Bud, don't! For God's sake, don't hurt her!"

His eyes widened and he looked down at her half wonderingly. Then his mind seemed to come back from the heights of the rigging inside the Big Top where there shone a glittering firefly poised gracefully on the end of a long perch-pole perpendicularly balanced by a man below in pink silk tights.

"Oh!" he ejaculated, his face clearing, "it is you! Of course! I'd plumb forgot you. You always were hanging around, weren't you? Hang around now and I'll give you something to look at. You don't need to be acting like you was going to scream, for there ain't nobody that'd hear you. It's sure some band they've got this season. Some grand bunch of wind jammers! If anybody should come a-strolling out here from the dressing rooms, you just keep your trap shut, do you hear? If you don't, I'll make our dear Trixie finish her act earlier to-night than she ever did before. Savvy? And say, listen here! If you ever pipe off who done it I'll get you some way, and I'll sure send you down a fast road to our dear Trixie. Now listen, you know me—you know I ain't just crazy about my voice—I ain't talking 'cause I love to hear it!"

The frail, half crippled limbs of the small, gray-haired mother trembled violently beneath her. Mortal terror made her cower before this man with the drug-lighted eyes. She shook in an agony of fear, though the fear was not for herself.

The man reached a bony hand into his pocket and drew something forth. He held it out, close to her colorless face.

"See this little sling shot—'nigger shooter' they call it down south where I've been hibernating. Innocent looking ain't it? Just a plain piece of a wide rubber band fastened to a fork of a tree branch. See this little pebble? It's about as innocent looking as was the pebble the little hero David used to kill Goliath with. Well"—he paused, pushed back his sleeves, mocking the manner of an artist of legerdemain, and smiled malevolently—"by placing the pebble in the rubber sling thusly, I can hit Mr. Pinktights with it. He'll jump, of course, and—Bang! Down'll come the perch-pole with our dear Trixie. And all the show's horses and all the show's men will not be able to put her together again. It was clever of me to figure out a way of making her sweetheart do the real job, wasn't it?"

He paused and made a queer clicking sound with his tongue and teeth.

"She thought she could fool me, did our innocent little Trixie. Thought I wasn't over seven, and that I would fall for anything she doped out for me. Must have known that I had got hep to her and Pinktights a-wanting to get married, and that I was going to have a little say-so about it, because she wrote me a note when I first come hanging around the lot at Naperville, and she had a roustabout lay for me and slip it into my mitt when there wasn't anybody to pipe it off. Oh, she's a fox all right, all right! But she couldn't fool her Uncle Dudley, not much, she couldn't! What do you guess she wrote in that note, old woman?"

Mrs. Mason shrank closer to the canvas behind her, and shivered under the leer of the glowing eyes bent upon

her. She moved her lips noiselessly. With despair and terror filling all her being, she gazed through the doors of the Big Top at the man and woman in the center ring. How many times had she stood right here in this self-same spot and looked on at that scene! How many times had her eyes blinded with salt tears as she watched her girl risking her young life that they two might eat and have shelter when they slept! How many times had her craven old heart contracted with fear lest her girl come crashing to the ground! How many times had she seen in her imagination that limp figure in its gay pink silk and glistening spangles carried across the arena in Joe's strong arms! How many times had she knelt beside it and implored it to speak to her! Once she had even caught herself screaming; but her vivid imaginings had not disgraced her, nor had Trixie learned of them, for no one had heard save Jerimy Kennerly, and he had said, "they was lots of mice round the props, and that he didn't blame her none for screechin'." But to-night—to-night a more hideous danger menaced her girl than ever had menaced before, and her eyes were dry and hot, and her tongue was dumb!

She gazed at that center ring with a steady fierceness as though she would so warn its performers.

Joe's young, sinewy body was devoting itself to the balancing of the long perch-pole. The big end of the pole rested in a leather socket suspended from a wide leather belt encircling his waist. His brown head was tilted, his tanned face lifted, his eyes glued, with never a waver, upon the pink and spangled figure moving about with agile grace on the end of the pole, far above him.

Trixie slid a pink satin foot into a rope noose, or loop; the crowd in the innumerable rows of seats leaned forward expectantly; the Little Mother outside the doors caught her breath in a gasp; the man near her laughed softly and made a clicking sound with his tongue.

Trixie smiled down just a bit nervously into Joe's up-turned face. Somehow she had been unable to dispel the feeling of fear and dread which had been renewed to-night by that crunching of cinders behind the stake wagon.

Joe smiled up at her reassuringly, and Trixie, feeling an odd warmth steal over her, wondered if at last this could be love. If after all these years—she was to care for the one man who had ever loved her *blindly*. Poor old Spinks had loved her; but he had found that she wasn't exactly prudish about Truth, and he had ceased to care—had even shunned her ever after. Bud had loved her, still loved her, if his following her about was any proof—but Bud had loved her with shrewd, open eyes. He had always been able to delve down into her very soul and drag forth her most carefully guarded secrets. He had told her again and again that he knew her as she would never know herself. Bud had loved her despite all that (incomprehensible thing was Love!); he had loved her, but he had done it *hatefully open-eyed!* Only Joe had loved her blindly! Joe—and—the mater, of course. And blindness was to be expected from mothers! Still——

Strange! She was actually feeling sorry for the Little Mother! Wouldn't the mater fall on her neck if she knew! Always was a soft little thing! Queer! She

was getting a lump in her throat just thinking about the dim eyes that she knew were looking in at her from the doors. Must be that love made you get sort of sentimental. Must be!

She looked toward the wide doors, but only darkness lay beyond them, and she shivered as with a chill.

"See her shake then?" Bud Snyder cackled gleefully, turning for a triumphant look at his one-time mother-in-law. "Guess she feels something clutching at her right now, don't you 'reckon,' as the idol used to say?" He paused for an answer but none came. Then:

"Haven't got your wits with you, have you? Must have used them all up a while ago when you tried to steer me into a lot of sloppy sentiment. How your dutiful Trixie would laugh if she could set her lamps on you now! She was always so proud of you, wasn't she?"

Little Mrs. Mason reached out a trembling hand in a vague, half-conscious search for support. Her fingers came in contact with something cold and hard. It was a perpendicular rod! For an instant she held to it, her body dragging heavily upon her trembling arm; then her hand relaxed its grip and began to wander about rather aimlessly, moving very slowly this way and that. On either side that rod were other rods. Suddenly the Little Mother became conscious of them. They were iron bars—the iron bars of Zetta's lion wagon!

At the time she did not wonder that the wooden sides were not on, nor did she marvel at the keeper's carelessness when her cautiously moving fingers found the padlock missing and only the bolt-fastening in place. There was no wondering, no thought, no reasoning. There was

now only a black chaos where fear had been but a moment before.

The man leering at her through the shadowy darkness was speaking, but the Little Mother's ears had gone deaf.

"I haven't told you about the heavenly plot our angel girl tried to put over on me, have I? She knew that I'd strike from the outside where I could make an easy getaway, and she figured that my being a good deal nearsighted was in her favor. See? Well, she wrote me that she had learned fancy bare-back riding and that now she was a real kinker, and that she wished I'd come some night and see her. Said she wore chiffon draperies and rode a black horse, in the center ring, number ten.

"Said I'd know her, she was sure, though her hair had gotten a bit darker, was kind of bronze now, and that she wasn't plump any more but quite slender. Said if I had any bouquets that wasn't working to throw a few at her. And then she had the brass to quote something from the Bible about 'doing unto others as you'd have others do unto you.' Swell little game, wasn't it? I haven't found out who the kinker is that she wants to get rid of, but I've got a hunch it's little Joie Kennerly. She was always jealous of her even when the little idol was nothing but a kid. But I was on to our Trixie, and I didn't pay any attention to that note." He stopped and fumbled for a moment at his shirt front; then the thin, waxen fingers fell away from it inertly, and he glared at the gray-haired woman leaning against the sidewall. "I just threw it away and asked questions about her act of them that didn't know me. That's how I'm here at the exact time to see our little perch-pole artist do her stunt. Clever of

me, wasn't it?" He rubbed his nervous hands together gently, and cackled triumphantly.

Had the Little Mother heard, she would not have believed—*could* not have believed—this thing which he had just told her; but Mrs. Mason had not heard. With her dilated eyes upon the deadly little instrument in Bud Snyder's restless fingers, she had been groping through a mental haze, and all the time her trembling hand was wandering cautiously from iron bar to iron bar of the lion wagon's rear doors.

"Do you suppose Trixie thought I'd ever get blind enough that I wouldn't know *her*? Well, here's where I show her that if I was blind as a bat I could always spot her. Here's where I show her, too, that even if my hands are not as steady as they was when I used to balance her perch, they're still steady enough for the job I come here to do to-night.

"I understand she finishes her act this season by unfurling a flag, and I guess that ought to be about the time for my little share in the performance. I'll just wait for that flag. And remember, old woman, if you squeal it won't bring your Trixie back to you, but it's likely to take you to your Trixie." The man's thin lips cackled again uncannily. "Say!" he ejaculated admiringly, "look at her now! Some class! Believe me! That's *some class*."

Trixie was smiling and fitting her foot more firmly into the noose near the top of the pole. As the Little Mother lifted her burning eyes to the graceful pink figure, Trixie made one quick movement, swung out at right angles from the perch-pole, straightened and stiffened her body, and waved her bare white arms to the applauding mass

of humanity below. The next moment and she would unfurl the silken American flag which she would take from beneath the lace at her bosom.

The Little Mother's eyes burned in their sockets like balls of fire. In another instant Trixie, her little girl, the child of her own flesh, would be——

But the fall might not kill ; it might only—ah, dear God where was the difference between a broken back and a broken neck !

She shrank a bit farther into the shadows while the man before her gloated over and caressed the death-dealing thing in his long, yellow-stained fingers. Then, suddenly, drowned by the music of the band to all ears save her own throbbing ones and those of this man who once had been her son-in-law, she cried out her warning.

"Bud ! the lions ! I'm opening their cage !"

The man lifted his head with an oath. His drug-bright eyes penetrated the shadows ; saw the hand tugging at the iron bolt ; made a strange noise in his throat that might have been a call for her to stop ; took a step in her direction, his face livid, his arms stretched out to pull her away from the awful thing ; heard the bolt shoot back ; and turning with a look of white horror, fled stumbling, cursing, shouting from the padroom.

How long the Little Mother lay in the shadows unconscious she never knew. She must have fainted simultaneously with the shooting back of the bolt. The blare of the band heralded her returning consciousness, and she sat up slowly, wondering vaguely. Then it all came back to her and she clung to the spokes of the wagon wheels and drew herself upright.

Leaning against the iron bars, she strained her eyes into the darkness that lay beyond the open door.

The lion wagon was *empty*! The lions were gone! Every one of them! *Gone*!

She staggered weakly to the wide doors of the Big Top. In the center ring was an equestrienne pirouetting on the back of her glossy black horse.

The pink and spangled target was no longer smiling down through the aërial rigging!

Mechanically she made her way across the sawdust path to the dressing-tent. With numb fingers touching the sidewall, she entered. There, within, were the long rows of trunks placed side by side, and in front of them, tired, half-clad women were putting on or taking off silks and tinsels, paints and powders. But Trixie's trunk was deserted!

For one brief instant she stood swaying in the doorway, her face ashen, and with gray wisps of hair straggling forlornly about it; then with a strangling cry she turned and sprang out into the night.

CHAPTER XX

EXIT TRIXIE

OUTSIDE the doctor's tent Mrs. Mason came upon a group of strangely silent men and women. At the far edge of this group was Trixie. With a low, inarticulate cry she pushed her way through the crowd to her daughter's side.

"You're all right, Trixie? They ain't nothing happened to you?" She lifted her white face solicitously, and the hands that a moment ago were limp and lifeless caught and held her girl's arms with a grip which could not be shaken off.

Trixie looked down at her half angrily; then an unprecedented tenderness lighted her blue eyes for an instant, and she bent her golden head and whispered:

"You don't need to worry any more, Muzzie. He—he——" Her eyes widened, and her voice sank under a weight of awe.

The Little Mother searched her daughter's face anxiously, shrinkingly. Cold apprehension crept through her numb flesh and brain.

"You've nothing to be scared of any more," Trixie began again. "Your timid heart don't need to fear Bud—for he—he's——"

The older woman tried to speak, to say "yes" inquiringly, but her tongue seemed paralyzed. She shivered;

then a shudder passed from the straggling gray locks down to the clay-stained, cinder-torn shoes.

"Dead!" finished the whispering voice of the girl at her side. "Jerimy Kennerly picked him up just inside the ropes, to the south of the horse tent. Old Kennerly was just coming up to the padroom when he heard somebody yell 'lions'! He says it was the most awful shriek he ever heard from a human being. He followed the sound and—and found Bud."

The Little Mother leaned heavily against her girl's supporting arm. Her pulses began to shake off their numbness and to ache poignantly. The visions that rose before her appalled, terrified eyes sent a clammy chill over her body.

Dead! He was dead! And she had killed him! She had murdered! Her hands reeked with his blood!

With a quick, unconscious movement she held her work-worn hands up to the light that flickered from the acetylene burner before the doctor's tent.

They were not red. No. But they were oddly wet! Horribly, sickeningly wet!

How much had they left of him?

That time they had killed their keeper, the remnants of the body——

Oh! It was too awful! Too accusingly awful!

For a brief interval they stood there in silence, Trixie and her mother, staring with the rest of the group at the door of the doctor's tent. Then Joe's familiar figure was suddenly silhouetted against the light of the tent's interior. The next moment he had pushed his way through the small crowd to Trixie's side.

The girl raised her eyes to the man's in mute questioning. The man nodded slowly.

"Dead as a door nail!"

The Little Mother shivered perceptibly.

"Cold, Muzzie?" Joe bent over her with awkward tenderness.

Mrs. Mason shook her head.

"The—the lions got him?" asked Trixie, shuddering and pressing closer to the side of the stalwart Joe.

"That's the story that somebody got busy with. When I first heard it, I figured that Bud must have freed the brutes as we were coming off, in the hope that they might get us. But I decided that theory was no good, because it would take a much *braver* person than Bud ever was to stand in front of a lion cage and open its doors. That's an act that calls for a cast-iron nerve, and we know that Bud's nerve had been shot to pieces with dope. So I figured that the brutes must have got out some other way.

"When Jerimy Kennerly found him, he had fallen over a guy line and was still warm. Kennerly says there wasn't a lion in sight."

"They—they got—*away!*" The gray-haired little woman whispered the words under her breath, but her daughter's keen ear caught them.

"Poor Muzzie! She has only Zetta's lions to be afraid of now. She doesn't seem to understand, Joe, that we can protect her. She's such a coward, is Muzzie!" crooned Trixie, passing an arm round her mother's waist and smiling with sweet deprecation into the lover's face that bent to hers.

The Little Mother had not heard. Her fascinated gaze

was fixed with hot intensity upon the door of the doctor's tent. The straggling wisps of gray hair blew unheeded about her face. Her thin lips worked spasmodically at unspoken words. Suddenly she moved a step forward to meet a short, stocky figure that came lurching up to the waiting group of awed men and women.

It was Jeremy Kennerly! Jeremy, with something forebodingly electric in his screened eyes and about his person; something like an aura, or the glow round a flaming sword.

"He's—dead? Really—*dead?*" Little Mrs. Mason caught at him with the claw-like fingers of a trembling hand.

Jeremy nodded his great, grizzled head.

"But it wa'n't the lions, Mis' Mason. It was the scare that killed him."

The Little Mother gasped, and her thin hands crossed themselves against her shrunken, withered breast. Jeremy pretended not to see this demonstration of thanksgiving. He glared at her from behind his bushy brows and went on:

"His heart was already on the blink, you understand, from the dope that he'd been a-handin' to it sence Trixie—that is, sence he got the hook from the F. & W.; and when he got so excited, why—that poor, busted heart of his'n jest—blunk out."

"But the—lions, Mr. Kennerly?" asked the gray haired woman anxiously. And Joe and Trixie leaned forward with bated breaths.

Jeremy turned his head in an attitude of listening. He had heard a familiar step—the step of one for whom he

had been impatiently looking. But either his ears had deceived him, or he had at hand more important business.

He turned back to the Little Mother, and in a voice which he tried hard to make matter-of-fact and impersonal, he said:

"They wa'n't no lions let loose, Mis' Mason. They was transferred to their new wagon in the menagerie tent this mornin'. The lion wagon in the padroom *was empty afore it was opened!*" He looked away from the white old face lifted to his, and finished: "'Course Bud never knowed that. He just 'lowed the brutes had got him, and he kicked over the bucket! 'Twa'n't nobody's fault but his'n."

Trixie sighed audibly—a sigh that contained something else than relief. It was heavy with a vague, undefined emotion, which might be either pity or sentiment suddenly aroused from latency.

"You're shut of him at last, ain't you?" Jeremy bent his beetling brows and electrically lighted eyes upon the blonde young lady who shrank involuntarily from their piercing scrutiny, as she clung to the tall man at her side.

"She's been free a long time, Mr. Kennerly. She got a divorce, you know," said Joe defensively, though he did not quite know why he should defend, nor from what he was defending.

"Yes?" Jeremy spat into the shadows at the right of him, thrust his stubby thumbs under his elastic braces and glowered down at Trixie.

"Yes? Well, she might 'a been divorced but she wa'n't *shut* of him, and she *knowed* it. I reckon that's the reason she wrote him this note." He dropped one hand

from his braces and thrusting his fingers into a pocket drew therefrom a crumpled bit of paper.

"You—you— Where did you get that? Give it to me! Give it to me!" Trixie, with darkening eyes and rapid breath, sprang at the big square hand that held the bit of paper. But Jerimy raised the hand above and beyond her reach.

"So you wanted to get rid of my little Joie, and you told him that you was a kinker now, and that you rode in the center ring! That you was——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Kennerly. You are addressing my promised wife." Joe touched Jerimy's arm gently.

"Your promised wife and a would-be murderer. She ain't no better 'cause her plan didn't work. She's just as bad! Demmit! Just as bad! She ain't never been on the square. I—I reckon I ought to send her along to keep poor Bud company, only—I guess she wouldn't go the same direction he went. She's a——"

"She's my girl! And she's the best girl a mother ever had! I remember now—Bud told me about that note, but she didn't mean it, Mr. Kennerly. I know she didn't mean it!"

Trixie pulled her mother roughly away from the accuser. She despired supplication.

"What business is it of old Kennerly's what I wrote to my ex-husband? He's a thief or he wouldn't have a note that was written to another man."

"The doctor took it from a pocket of the dead man's shirt, and as for me a-havin' a right to it—Hell! It's about my Joan, and I reckon anything about her concerns me, 'specially if it's a plan to kill her. I reckon it

just about gives me the right to shut off the wind-pipe of the demmed murderer that wrote it." Jerimy bent over the girl threateningly. But this time Trixie did not shrink; she stared back into his blazing eyes defiantly.

"And it was my Joan that come a-runnin' to the horse tent to-night to tell me that Bud and Mrs. Mason was in the padroom. She had heard you-all a-talkin' afore the perch-pole act went on, and she got to worryin' about you, and when she started to the padroom and heard Bud's voice, she come like mad to me. And she says, says she: 'Oh Uncle Jerry, poor Trixie is in danger! Bud's in the padroom and I know he isn't there for no good! Come quick, Uncle Jerry! Come quick!' And that's the difference, ma'am. You was a-tryin' to kill her, and she was a-tryin' to save you."

Jerimy paused for breath, and Joe pressed forward aggressively, but Trixie motioned him back.

"This here's your note, ain't it? It's your'n! It's your'n! Confess it," Jerimy boomed, indifferent to the group of curious faces that were gathering about him.

Trixie looked into the purple face and smiled scornfully. She, too, was now indifferent to the curious eyes that were focussed upon her.

The Little Mother, unconscious of all the world save her girl, wrung her thin, work-knotted fingers in an agony of fear and suspense.

Joe, oblivious to everything but the accuser and the accused, held his breath and waited silently for Trixie's denial.

But Trixie did not deny. Some one once said, "Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad."

And Trixie was suddenly mad, suddenly blind with fury.

"You done it, didn't you? You planned to let Bud kill my Joie, and you sent him this here note didn't you?" bellowed Jerimy.

"Yes!" screamed Trixie, white beneath her rouge. "Yes, I did! *I did!* I DID! What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm a-goin' to—to"—Jerimy's elevated arm came down—and the hand with the crumpled scrap of paper stretched out toward her throat. But at that instant Joe caught the arm and held it fast in his muscular young grip.

"Don't do it, Kennerly. It—it isn't worth while. Besides"—Joe hesitated and gulped down something that was rising in his voice—"besides, I guess she didn't really mean it, and your Joan would be the first to forgive her. Let's do the thing the—little idol would have us do."

Jerimy relaxed as if some magic switch had been touched which threw off the electric current of passion. The arm which Joe had freed dropped limply to his side, and without a word Trixie Snyder's accuser and Joan's would-be avenger turned abruptly and strode heavily off, tearing up and flinging to the winds as he went the note which had lain next to Bud Snyder's breast.

A sense of victory swept over Trixie, and with it came the thought of the man who had defended her. She raised her doll-blue eyes to Joe's unsmiling face, and a tilt of elation was in her purring words when she said softly:

"You love me, Joe, don't you? You don't even care what that old man roared about in his pipe dream, do

you?" So lightly did she dismiss Jeremy's accusation. Then, insinuatingly: "It's too bad the F. & W. won't allow a marriage to take place on the road, but the season will soon be over, Joe."

She had never said so much before, yet Joe had never seemed less eager.

His honest eyes looked down in pained amazement at the rouged little face lifted so temptingly to his, and slowly he shook his head. Then, with a gesture that might have been merely the physical, outward sign of a great sadness, though to the girl it was no less than proof of the repulsion which showed in every pained feature, he bowed gravely and backed silently away from the curious group.

Trixie watched him go with phlegmatic calm. At this moment, when love was slipping through her fingers, it seemed strangely unworthy the candle. Its chief mission seemed to be the sickening power to die out at the crucial time when one most needed its warmth. It was like a wave from the sea that lapped the sands at one's feet so caressingly, until one stooped to dip one's feverish fingers into its cooling depths and found that, at this one time when it could be worth while, it had receded.

She smiled bitterly. (Somewhere behind the calm she had begun to hurt). Love! Bah! How quick it was to desert you when you turned to it in your hour of need. How utterly worthless and unreliable!

With a sudden burst of passion she tore Joe's ring from her finger and flung it after him into the dark. Then, for the first time since her babyhood, the first time since her feet had learned to be independent of the guiding mater-

nal hand, she realized her need of her mother. With a little cry of loneliness and despair, Trixie Mason Snyder threw herself into the Little Mother's arms and wept; and the tears that moistened the mother's breast were not her usual tears of fury, but the first tears of real grief ever to touch the doll-blue eyes.

An hour later the trunks belonging to Trixie—the Greatest Perch-Pole Artist in the World—were loaded on a taxi that was to carry them to a train bound for the west, the far west, where was the old Mason farm; and a tall perch-pole balancer leaning wearily against a stake wagon at that end of the lot where the shadows fell thickest saw the indistinct figures of two women creep noiselessly across the lot toward the street and the waiting taxi.

The figures were huddled together, their blurred silhouettes merging intimately; and though they were painfully familiar to the man who stared after them with aching eyes, there was about them an air of companionship, an indescribable affinity that was strange. Perhaps it was but the softening touch of the darkness; perhaps it was really the warm glow of love—a love that on the one side was just dawning, and on the other a love that always had been at high noon!

The man behind the stake wagon reached out his arms in mute entreaty and he made a movement as if to run after the disappearing figures, but something stayed his feet.

He sighed heavily. His arms fell to his sides. He leaned against the wagon for support, and closing his eyes shut out the picture of his sweetheart's departure from the F. & W. and—from him.

It was an ignominious exit, with no one at hand to wave a farewell, not one eye to shed a tear, not one voice to call out a "good-luck" wish; yet never in all her life had Trixie Mason Snyder been so worthy of all those things, and never had she desired them so little. Never had the Little Mother been so elevated to importance. And never had her girl been so conscious of her. Ignominious as it was, love spread the wings of victory over that silent breaking of ties.

Thus it was that Trixie and her mother went out through the darkness to the world which lay beyond the ropes of the Greatest on Earth,

CHAPTER XXI

JERIMY PLAYS HIS TRUMP CARD

AS JERIMY strode away from the group before the doctor's tent his hands were clenched, his rugged old face was purple, and in his heart was a storm of impotent rage. Every muscle in his thick-set body was tense, every nerve rampant. He was a thwarted Tisiphoné, an avenging god bereft of power.

He stumbled over a guy line, regained his tottering equilibrium, and cursed softly beneath his breath. Then he lifted his massive head and stared defiantly at the moon.

The moon stared back at him unabashed, for the moon knew Jeremy well. Had it not heard his blustering protests for more than half a century? Had it not been the unresponsive target for all his fuming perplexities and arguments since first he had discovered his need of a vent? Truly, the moon and Jeremy knew each other.

"You confounded old lump of green cheese! You knew all the time what that she-cat was up to, and you never give me no warnin', nor did nothin' yourself!" Jeremy rested a foot on a guy-stake and rubbed a bruised knee mechanically.

Out front the hawkers were recouping their strength and voices against the time when the show would be over

and the flood of humans with money to spend would be let out upon them. From inside the Big Top came thundering strains of music. Even the steam calliope could scarcely have added to the volume of sound. Those thundering strains were the cue for Joan's finish.

Jerimy listened to it a moment in silence; then, taking out his pipe and carefully filling it, he fell to soliloquizing about that barren future which lay before him.

Of a sudden he began to cough violently. Something might or might not have gotten into his throat.

"Hell!" He interrupted the soliloquy with a gesture of disgust. "Hell!" He pursed his wrinkled lips about the yellow stem of his pipe and, striking a match against the rough leg of his trousers, tried to light the inverted pipe from which the tobacco had long since fallen.

"She was a-plannin' to hurt my Joan, and she's got to get out of the F. & W. After a little, when her poor old maw ain't around, I'm a-goin' to have a little gabfest with Miss Trixie. They ain't a-goin' to be no flowery speeches on nuther side. It's a-goin' to be danged brief, about like this: I goes up to her an' I says; 'You durned piece of pizen, you got jest *exactly* two minutes to make your get-away. Jest *exactly* two minutes of which one is already three-fourths gone!' Then she says, 'Old Fool, shut your trap and stop your bluffin'.' 'One half minute left,' says I. 'Are you a-goin'?' Well she tosses her head and—*stays*, and o' course I—keeps my word."

The cold passivity of the moon was softened by a thin veil of silvery cloud.

With an oath he flung away the charring match and moved off toward the padroom.

"I wouldn't be none surprised if I've got distemper," he grunted, coughing again to cover that odd something else.

He moved round the Big Top, over and under guy ropes, and through the phantom-breeding semi-darkness with a sureness and precision of step that was almost uncanny. Half way to the padroom he passed a shadowy shape that was skulking along in the same direction, and catching it roughly by the shoulder Jerimy turned it about and, placing a square-toed boot in the middle of its back, sent it spinning toward the boundary ropes.

"Better run home, Deacon. This ain't no place for men what grows side-whiskers on their chops. They's a lot of distemper round these parts, and it's ketchin'. The blue painted seats inside this big rag has all been vaccinated and fumergated. You can pay a real buck and get in there, but you're all wrong if you think you can see somethin' by sneakin' under the ropes. You're all *wrong*, Deacon, and in this place even the horses go to the *right*." The shadowy shape paused when it had lost momentum and called back a husky epithet to Jerimy, but Jerimy laughed. He had needed this outlet for the storm that had raged within him.

"Better not peeve me, Deacon; I'm real mean when I get riled. I'm liable to ketch a-hold of them coat-tails of your'n and drag you off to the den of snakes. We got a African snake in there that eats men alive, and they ain't nothin' he's as fond of as Deacons, 'specially if they have side-whiskers. Now don't you talk back! They ain't nobody a-askin' you to lead this here meetin'; it's the kind that can only be led by a cuss like me, what won't

get his words all tangled up in a flock of whiskers." Jeremy waved his arm toward the invisible ropes beyond. "Don't take no round-trip ticket, 'cause you ain't a-comin' back less'n you've got as much nerve as a lion tamer. Adios! as we says in Russia. Adios!"

The shape grew less distinct; blurred and widened; then slowly it became one with the night. Jeremy looked after it with a gleam of satisfaction. He felt like a smoking cannon that has just relieved itself of an indigestible stuffing of dynamite.

Whistling softly because he felt like cursing loudly, he swung into the dimly lighted padroom.

Near the wide doors of the Big Top was a tall man in a gray traveling suit and a soft felt hat. He stood gracefully erect, his dark head thrust forward, his severely chiseled profile outlined against the light of the arena, his eyes fixed with hot intensity on the center ring, where a girl in floating red-brown chiffons, the exact shade of her autumn-gold hair, danced like a fairy possessed of butterfly wings on the glistening back of a pompous little black horse.

The arena was empty save for horse and rider in that center ring and a few property men in khaki uniforms. The other rings and the stages had been deserted when the cue had come for the spectacular "finish" of "The World's Greatest Equestrienne." And never had that little equestrienne danced so magically. Never had her feet touched her horse's back so lightly. Never had she seemed so ethereal, yet never more palpitatingly vital, more entrancingly tangible. It was as though some electric current went to the dancing, satin-shod little toes

from those gray eyes looking on through the wide back doors. It was as though a spirit of mad joy had entered into the dancer and her wildly floating chiffons. Perhaps through some occult force the heart which throbbed beneath the snowy bosom sensed the physical nearness of that other throbbing heart. For surely the wings of Mercury had never carried messages to the gods with such swift sureness and grace as was possessed to-night by those twinkling, dancing, pirouetting little feet!

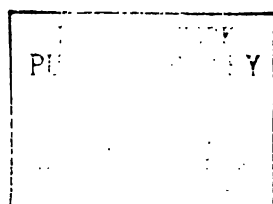
Jeremy stopped whistling abruptly, and a heavy sigh came up from some subterranean part of his great breast. His suddenly mute lips twitched nervously. His bushy brows lowered until only a glint of faded blue shone through them. He thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets, glared about him for a moment as if in quest of help, then, jerking his hands ferociously out again, went slowly across the padroom to the man near the doors.

Hell! What was he bellyachin' around for, anyway! Hadn't he sent for this man? And didn't he need him to take his place in lookin' after Joan—when—when he—was *gone*? And wa'n't this man a-goin' to make his Joie happy? By gad, he was, or he, Jeremy, would put a pill through him! And demmit! he hoped he wouldn't have to do that—the place where he buried his dead was too full already!

But they wa'n't no reason to s'pose that this man couldn't make Joie happy, and that was what he wanted, didn't he? He did! And demmit! They wa'n't no amount of old, worn-out McChesneys, alias Kennerlys, that'd stand in his way of gettin' happiness for the little



Never had she seemed so ethereal, yet never more palpitatingly vital. It was as though a spirit of mad joy had entered into the dancer.



bronze idol. He'd get it peaceably if he could, but if they had to be trouble—demmit! hadn't he done arranged with hisself to *get it anyway!* And right here was where he had to stop a-feelin' sorry for hisself and wade into things, and he wa'n't no single-footer when it come to chasin' somethin' for Joie. No' sirree! He might be a bit stiff in the joints, and have a little too much pork on his bones, but he had a demmed good mind at figgerin' out ways and means for the little idol; and despite the stiffness of his ossified old joints, he reckoned they still had speed enough to lambast the daylights out of anything that threatened his little girl.

Who the devil was *he*, anyway, to put his happiness afore her'n? Anybody'd think he was the Big Squeeze of somethin' or ruther, 'stead of a tough old nut that ought to crawl at her feet! He guessed if she still wanted her 'elerphunt man' he was the Santa Claus that was a-goin' to give him to her! And right here was where the business was a-goin' to be done!

"Howdy do, Dorset! See you've blowed in all right!" said Jerimy in greeting, his booming, resonant voice losing itself in the blare of the band that was just inside the doors, his wide hand outstretched, his ruddy face beaming.

Philip Dorset turned his head in a dazed manner and looked at the short, stocky man in the pink-striped shirt and the coduroy trousers who stood behind him. Then, with an exclamation, he swung round and caught between his two long hands the wide, hairy hand stretched out to him.

"Kennerly! I—I've been watching her and I had for-

gotten that it was not old times ; forgotten that I had ever been away. You wired me to come without delay. I— My God, man! Why did you frighten me so? Didn't you know that I would think something had happened to *her*? Didn't you know that I would take the first train out, and that I would die of agonized suspense every time it stopped at a station?"

Philip Dorset released his companion's hand and passed one of his own across his eyes as though to shut out the visions that rose before them, the visions which had haunted him during all those long hours in that tantalizingly creeping train.

"And then when I arrived here and couldn't find you, I rushed to the dressing-room, and old Granny Wilson told me that Joan was on. I came out here, and seeing her in there, alive and well, seemed to bring back all my lost faith in God. It was like a miracle, finding her like *that*, after the visions I had had of her broken little body." He paused and bent his head that his keen eyes might peer more closely through the thatched brows of the other man.

"She is well, isn't she, Kennerly?" he asked rather sharply. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Jerimy responded, nodding his head, and gently drawing the taller man into the concealing shadows of Zetta's lion wagon where they might stand unnoticed by the artists who were gathering in the pad-room for the next number.

"And they ain't nothin' wrong. Not with her, noways. They is a lemon around here that might try to double-cross her some way, but I reckon when I get through

squeezin' that lemon they won't be much left of it. I'm some lemon squeezer! But they ain't nothin' wrong with our Joie, 'ceptin' she's still kinder lonesome for a gink what used to be the F. & W. elephant man."

Philip Dorset caught Jerimy's two shoulders with his slim, muscular fingers, and gripped them with the compressing strength of a vise; and over his handsome face slowly spread—and as slowly receded—a look of infinite gladness. When the gladness had faded, the slight hollows in his cheeks seemed to deepen, the brightness in his eyes to cloud with shadows; and with a hard, bitter smile he dropped his hands to his sides.

"Funny!" went on Jerimy ruminatingly. "Durned funny thing! You know this said elephant man thinks he's already hitched to somebody else. And he ain't! Not a hitch! He's free! Funny, ain't it?"

"What—what are you saying?" Philip Dorset's startled eyes held Jerimy's.

"'S right! This here man I'm a-talkin' about can ask Joie to-night——"

"My God, Kennerly! Have you gone mad?"

"Not much madder'n other folks."

"And yet you——"

"Somebody finds out that Joie's old nurse left her on that London bridge 'cause her mother'd died and the old lady thought a curate wa'n't no kind of a man to be bothered with a infant; and a detective in New York found out that a certain lady that had married a certain man and then another one hadn't no child at all, 'cept an adopted one."

Philip Dorset leaned heavily against the lion wagon

that jutted out of the darkness at his left and stared dumbly, fixedly at Jeremy.

"They ain't nothin' timid about that lady, and she ain't got a mite of respect for law, nuther." Jeremy hitched up his braces and winked a bleared blue eye at Philip. "The minute her husband got out of these here United States, she hot-footed it for Reno. She got a divorce out there, and then she and this other gent got spliced right off. About the time they got back to New York, news reached there that first husband was dead. Said lady couldn't stand settin' back and gettin' none of the leavin's, so she shows up in the darkest black, gets her share, and after waitin' two weeks gets spliced again to the other gent. When she and said gent left for fureign parts a little later, they put a bug in the ear of first husband's lawyer. You see a child would get some of the leavin's, too; which it's been doin' for some years, though it ain't ever really arrived yet.

"Lawyers ain't got much sense no ways, and first husband made his'n agree to let her go her own sweet way—he was that anxious to be the *goat*. And then"—Jeremy cleared his throat gratingly—"one day I gets into the game. I finds the lady and I finds that she knows where your lawyers are and they know where you are, and I has a talk with the both of you, and I begins to get wise to her ladyship right on the dot. After I gets a line from Paris on the kid business, I makes my second call on her, and she——"

"But——"

"Oh, sure! She made some little fuss all right—at *first*! But they was ways of gettin' at the truth and of

makin' her show her hand, and I—took them ways."

He did not add—old Jerimy—that the way which had made her ladyship lay her cards face up on the table was a way that led through his purse; that a greater part of the savings of a quarter of a century had, before that interview was ended, been transferred to the greedy bank account of the woman who had stood between his Joie and her—happiness!

"You said——"

Philip whirled about and gripped Jerimy's broad shoulders.

"Sure I did!" replied Jerimy, staring serenely into the arena at his beloved idol, a seraphic look on his ruddy face that might have descended there from the soul of a martyred Savanarola.

"I said you was free as you ever was. And I got a paper in my pocket as proves it. I didn't tell you nothin' about it till I'd got her fixed and a copy of them Reno proceedings. I was that scared you'd queer things with your sickly notions of right and wrong. And now"—Jerimy Kennerly chuckled a bit hoarsely—"I reckon Joie can—can have her—*elerphunt man* 'thout any more trouble."

"And—you—you did that for—me!" Philip Dorset's voice was a whisper.

"Not—*exactly*." With rough affection Jerimy laid a hand on Dorset's arm. "You see, Joie's heart was dead set on you, and I'd of got you for her if I'd 'a had to broke into Hell! But I ain't never told her about the rummy mess. We can tell her later. Just now it's enough that you're free, and——"

"She's comin' off! Dorset! She's comin' off! I reckon I better run over to the—horse tent; I got some business to fix up to-night. Somethin' that—won't wait. I gotta get rid of a—a she cat and—and somethin' else that's in the way. Somethin' that Joie'd be ashamed of—maybe." He turned slowly toward the cinder path that led from the padroom. "Remember, Dorset, she's still my girl, and—I—ain't the kind of man as can be— Here she comes! S'long, Boy! She's a-comin' right out—to—her elephant man (just like old times, Phil!), and he's free to say—to say—any durned old thing he—he partic'lar—*wants* to say. He don't need to wait none. It's all right, Dorset! 'S all right! They ain't no call to wait for nothin'. Anything my Joie's 'elerphunt' man has to ask her, he can ask her to-night. They ain't never no to-morrow, Phil—and I—I've sort of—got to know *to-night*, afore I get rid of that thing what they ain't no room for! I—I got to know *to-night*, Phil! And—Philip——"

But Philip no longer heard. Through the wide doors came a groom and a shining black horse, and behind them came a fairy in gauzy, red-brown chiffons; a fairy with slim, tanned arms, bare graceful throat at the base of which was a violet shadow where two slender cords met, and sweet, cherry-red lips like no other lips in the world.

Philip took a quick step forward into the light, his arms extended, his body trembling, his voice trying hard to call out her name.

CHAPTER XXII

HER ELERPHUNT MAN

TED paused for an instant with a whinny of recognition, but the groom—a new one—with scarcely a glance at the pale, handsome man in the gray flannel suit, led Ted peremptorily on his way. Then through the wide doors of the grand old Big Top came little Joan Kennerly—*straight toward her worshiped elerphunt man!*

Her eyes met his, and a little cry arose in her suddenly constricted throat; but it was aborted by quick disbelief. The little feet that had swerved toward him came back to their original course.

It couldn't be Philip! It never had been, not once in all those times when she had seen him here waiting for her, all those visionary times during the long months since he had gone away.

No, it couldn't be! It couldn't be! And because she was so sure that when she looked again there would be only the shadows and Zetta's lion wagon, she turned her small head.

It was! It *was*! Once more a pair of burning gray eyes caught at hers. Once more two long hands reached out to her! Then—one of her own slim hands fluttered up to her throat, and quite of their own volition the satin-

shod little feet in their clumsy wooden sabots carried her *straight into the arms of her dear, dear elerphunt man*. The arms closed round her, regardless of the surprise in the faces that were passing on the way to the arena, and of the delighted calls of: "If it isn't Dorset!" "*Hello! It's Philip!*" "When did you drop back onto the planet?" "Well, well, old top! Glad to glimpse you again!" "Joan Kennerly, where'd you find him? Hold onto him until we come off so we can give him a squeeze, too!"

Then the last smiling face disappeared beyond the doors, and Joan was alone with her elerphunt man! She struggled about in the tense clasp that imprisoned her until she could look again into her Philip's face, and raising her gold-flecked eyes to his she gazed deep into the windows which no longer were opaque; in that instant all the choked-back hurt and wretchedness of months burst their dams and, together with this wondrous joy that had flooded so suddenly upon her, they swept away her last vestige of calm. Her eyes fogged and overflowed. Her slender little body shook with convulsions of emotion.

Without a word Philip Dorset lifted her in his long arms and carried her out into the night; out across the lot to the old trysting place where they had met after shows in that long ago day when he was a cynic and she was a child; out across the sawdust path to the rope beyond the dressing-tent, where was always the elusive odor of grease paints and the intermingling perfumes of many powders and of sweet-scented sachets.

The long arms held her close, and Joan, her heart pounding against her beloved's powerful breast, her head

nestling into the hollow of his shoulder, and her riotous, tumbling bronze hair brushing his lips at every step, wanted never to awaken from the beautiful dream of that moment.

"Joan! My little Joan! Mine! Mine at last!" he whispered to the fragrant hair, as he moved along the dressing-tent sidewall. Then quite suddenly he set her down, though his arms did not release her.

"Are you glad I've come back, Joie? Did you miss me? Tell me, little sweetheart, have you wanted me to come?"

Didn't he know? Couldn't he know? Had he never heard her calling to him in the middle of the night when her section of the F. & W. train swung along through the ink that blotted out all the world but—*him*? Had he never heard?

Silvery beads glistened on the long dark lashes; the lifted eyes were golden lakes, the red lips were trembling cherries, and in the piquant face was that quizzical, half-laughing, half-crying questioning and wondering which had been there that long ago night down by the cars—the look that had haunted Philip Dorset waking and sleeping, day and night ever since.

He kissed her hair, her brow and her wet eyes, but not yet did he touch the tempting lips. "Joan, dear! Have you wanted me to come? Do you want me to stay?"

His breath was warm against her cheek, his face intoxicatingly near to her own, and Joan wondered if she had died and gone to Heaven.

"Philip!" She whispered his name so softly that it might have been but a sigh had Philip's ear been less close to the vivid mouth. "Philip, I——"

"Yes, dear!"

"I have almost *died* with wanting you, and— and——"

"Yes, dear, you——"

"I—never—*doubted* you, Phil. And—when—when—ever I—thought you were in some fearful trouble, I—I loved you more than ever! I—I reckon——"

"Did Jerimy tell you that—that I—might come back?"

Joan nodded her tawny head, letting it come to rest once more upon his breast.

Philip sighed. What did he not owe to Jerimy Kennerly, the man who had set together the puzzle-pieces of his muddled life, who had broken away his shackles, restored his liberty, and given to him his own beloved little idol?

His gaze wandered off toward the horse tent, and for a moment he stood so, his lean arms about the girl-woman who was so necessary to his happiness, his dark hair stirring with the breath of night air, and a light of awed reverence in his softened eyes.

"Maybe"—Joan's fingers fluttered aimlessly about his cravat—"maybe you think that—I am not old enough *yet*. I'm soon to be twenty. Twenty is—is quite old, don't you think so? People do lots of things at twenty. They can go into business—vote (*almost*). They can get all sorts of diplomas—have balls—get into politics—and—and"—she jabbed recklessly at his cravat with the pearl pin which she had taken therefrom—"and at twenty—people—lots and *lots* of people get *married*." She sighed, "Twenty is pretty old, isn't it?"

"Oh, my Joan! My darling!" There was laughter in Philip's voice, but there was something else in it, too,

something of which he was not even ashamed. Gathering her closer to him, he bent his head; and then the famished lips of Joan's worshiped elerphunt man met those wistful red ones that had been so innocently inviting him.

Joan closed her flame-lit eyes. Her long lashes lay damp against her satiny cheeks. Her roughened hair rippled against her throbbing throat. Her little mother-breast, still so boyishly flat and unpromising, rose and fell tumultuously. Her small, sun-tanned hands were clutching the arms that held her. Her heart was crying out to the angel mother whom she had never known.

Then, with arms still about her, Philip told her his story.

She listened indifferently. What did it matter, the thing that had kept him from her, now that he was here at her side, now that he had—*kissed her!*

Of a sudden she drew away from the tense clasp of the man bending above her, and opening her eyes looked up at him with a sweet bubble of laughter.

"Oh, Elerphunt Man! Elerphunt Man!" she taunted, "you'd have wrecked both our lives—you'd have gone on sacrificing yourself and—and me, to the end of time, if Uncle Jerimy hadn't discovered that you needed a trainer much more than any elephant you ever had."

"But I had decided to take the matter into my own hands, Joan. I would have reached you eventually, dear. I——"

"But it might have been after I'd gotten so much older than twenty, Phil, that I'd be too deaf to hear your voice, and too blind to—to see you!" Then, with the laughter ebbing: "Oh, Phil—*Phil* dear! I wonder did God ex-

pect you to martyr yourself. I won't believe it, Phil. He is too just! Yet you—you, who have not believed in Him, have gone *beyond* His—demands. Phil——”

“But I—I've come to believe in Him again, Joan.”

The small face that was lifted to Philip's glowed and a warm little hand reached up and laid itself tenderly along one of his lean, clean-shaven cheeks.

“My—my father was one of His workers. He—he died soon after my mother. To-morrow I shall tell you of him and of—*her*. She—was his *wife*, Phil. You understand? She was——”

“Jeremy told me he had had news of—them!” A great, tender gladness shone on Philip's moonlit face, but it was a gladness that was only for her.

“To-morrow, Phil. To-morrow I'll tell you. I'll tell you about them and—about me—and about Trixie Snyder who has gone back to the world beyond the ropes, and Sidney Blake who was struck by one of the Big Top poles in a storm, and who went on to what he—to what he called the—‘Big Show.’” She glanced with a fleeting sadness towards the doctor's tent. “But to-night—to-night, Phil”—once more she was gazing up at him—“I—I want *you* to talk—to say to me all the things I have been wanting you to say since that—that night—down by the cars. And I want *her* to hear, too, Phil. I—I reckon she'll be 'most as glad—as—as I am.” She raised her eyes to the star-sprinkled sky.

Then a twinkle lighted those amber orbs as they came to rest once more on the adoring face above her, and turning her head and measuring the distance to the horse-tent she smiled wickedly.

"You see I'm not spurious, Phil, dear, after all. And I'm old enough to—to be a 'Mrs.' for some 'Mr.' But I'm still a—a circus lady. I'm still a—heterogenesis. I'm still a *mongrel*, Phil! Still a——"

Philip Dorset's gray eyes blazed down at her warningly, and he would have caught her roughly to him; but like a dart from an arrow, Joan Kennerly—child of the long ago—was running across the lot toward the horse tent.

A challenging laugh floated over her shoulder to the man who back east in the cities of men had begun to grow old, and it opened the clogged springs of youth in his heart; and then, for all the world like those olden times, Joan's elerphunt man gave pursuit; and he ran with the old, almost forgotten bound that belongs only to the elastic grace of an athlete.

CHAPTER XXIII

JERIMY SURRENDERS

JERIMY KENNERLY folded the note which he had been writing and carefully inserted it into an envelope. Very laboriously he addressed it to Lawson, and very thoughtfully he stood it upright on the box which had served as his writing desk. Then with a heavy sigh he glanced round his unpretentious little office.

"'Tain't much to be leavin'." He sighed again. "But I reckon gettin' used to a thing sort of makes it a habit, and any habit's hard to break."

He reached out and touched a brass-studded bridle that hung above the box, his fingers wandering lovingly over the polished metal, his heavy brows drawn close together.

"You old fool!" he muttered, turning his back to the piece of harness. "I reckon you're the only thing on earth that's softer'n mush!" He frowned at the floor disgustedly.

After a moment's silence: "A body'd think they was no place I could go to when I leave the old F. & W. And they's a atlas plumb full of places! 'Tain't as if I was a-goin' to have a family to drag around with me. 'Tain't like I'd have nobody at all. I won't. I'll be alone, 'thout nobody to bother about, and I reckon I ought to cut some great old capers a-travelin' round cattle or pan-handle class."

He pulled at his short, thick fingers until the joints cracked sharply.

"I ain't never had no hankerin' after Pullman class noway. And all they is left out o' the savin's won't buy Joie many of them luxuries that cost so much per lux. But I reckon Phil'll take good care of her. Them lawyers of his'n says he's richer'n anything, and I reckon how's she won't ever want for nothin'—not—*not even me!*"

The bluish, oddly wrinkled lips puckered thoughtfully.

"Funny how a fellow'll lie to hisself! Funny how he'll try to make hisself believe he's a-goin' to travel on railroads when all he's a goin' to do is—to cross a old river, and get into the dark on the other side so as no little idol will have to bump into him when she's out ridin' in her limoosine on the Avenue, or think it's one of her duties to take the old cob into her big home where he'd shame her by eatin' with his knife or—maybe—talkin' circus."

He coughed raucously and glanced almost furtively round the little room. His gaze came around to the letter and stopped.

"Guess when Lawson reads that old Kennerly is some tired of lookin' after equines, and has gone off on a spree that's a-goin' to last some few million years—though o' course he won't be knowin' that latter—he'll be surprised to the *past tense degree*. Huh! Never 'curred to me afore that Joie's 'tense' stuff may have somethin' to do with tents!" He chuckled, then instantly he coughed.

"'Pears like every time I laugh in my throat that a-way, it sort of tickles my tonsils."

He stooped and picked up a much worn leather bag,

stoutly strapped and buckled. Pulling a shabby cap down over his eyes, he looked once more round the familiar little office; then with an oath he kicked a stool out of his way and turned to the door.

Outside the moon greeted him satirically. It seemed to be laughing at the travesty of his life.

As Jerimy paused and scowled up at it there came a sudden soft swishing of cob-web draperies; then two arms caught him round the neck and held him tight.

"Oh, Uncle Jerry! Uncle Jerry! He's here! He's here! And—and he says he—doesn't give a—*hang* if I am a—a hybrid. He says——"

"He says," broke in Philip Dorset who came up behind the owner of the gurgling young voice, "he says, Jerimy Kennerly, that he is the richest man in the Universe, and that he owes all his wealth to you."

Jerimy moved about in the gripping arms uneasily.

He—he had wanted to get away 'thout seein' her again. It sort of turned the knife around, hearin' her voice once more, and feelin' her soft, clingin' little arms. Saints of men! If they *was* a God, why was He pickin' on him like this? Wa'n't He satisfied 'thwhat he had done? Hadn't he just paid the most of his savin's to a lucre-lovin' woman, and hadn't he left the rest to his little idol, 'ceptin' a few pensions he'd erranged for horses that was a-gettin' too stiff and ossified to work? And hadn't he been all ready to eradicate hisself so as a certain angel could be happy 'thout havin' to 'sociate with a old, stove-up plug like him? Well, then, why in—in *blazes* hadn't he been allowed to go 'thout gettin' so clawed up inside that they was danger of his sloppin' over!

"Be you tryin' to see just how long it'd take to choke me, Joie? Ain't you got a mite o' respect for wind-pipes and jug'lar veins?" he blustered gruffly, unwinding the young arms with a trembling hand.

"I'm trying to show you how happy I am, darling! I—I'm *terribly* happy, Uncle Jerry!" Joan smiled up at him radiantly.

"Be you, honey?" asked Jeremy, looking wistfully down into the glowing face. Then his brows went together in a straight, shaggy hedge. "Demmed funny way of showin' it," he grumbled. "Demmed funny way——"

"Uncle Jerry! *What* are you doing with your *grip*?" Joan interrupted him, her words coming with a surprised little intake of breath.

"Grip? Grip? Oh yes!" Jeremy gazed down at the worn leather bag blankly. "Yes, I——"

"Laundry in it, eh?" aided Philip, quite unconscious of just how much he was aiding.

Jeremy brightened.

"Sure. A bunch of my best moniegrammed silk shirts and my specially wove socks." Then, drawing from his pocket a long envelope sealed and addressed to Philip Dorset, he handed it over.

"Here's the *papers*, m'lord. They's no more mortgage." He was mocking melodrama, and he laughed boisterously. "They's only weddin' bells and a new way of wearin' the face for young ladies as wants to be in style. They's a way of lookin' like a bride on a magazine cover, and"—he swallowed with difficulty—"three is a crowd—a—a *Hell of a crowd*!"

"But there are no three here," whispered Joan softly,

as Philip stepped nearer to a flickering acetylene light, the long envelope with a seal freshly broken rattling in his unsteady hand. "And anyway, you'll never be a third, Uncle Jerry, because—because Philip—Philip and I are going to be—to be *one*. And you—you will only make *two*. And maybe some day—some day there'll be——"

Joan buried her flushed face against Jerimy's sagging old coat, and Jerimy coughed in a choked, strangled way.

"Lord!" he said deep down in his fond old heart, "Lord! I hadn't thought of that. I been so durned busy a-thinkin' about her, I plumb forgot that they would be little Joies some day, and that I wouldn't be here to see that they got fed right, and that they got proper cared for. But I reckon bein' grand-daughters of a sky-pilot would make them hanker mighty little for my sussiety, anyways. And I cal'clate Joie'll be careful not to feed them too much and—Demmit! It don't seem to take nothin' to get my wheels started—not nothin'!"

Joan rubbed a soft cheek against the faded brown corduroy, and as was her dear, familiar habit, she fingered the little pearl buttons on the pleat of his cotton shirt front.

"Ain't you one mite sore, Joie," he whispered against the fragrant hair, "at the old fool what never tried to find out who you was until he saw that your not knowin' might interfere with your gettin' married? Ain't you sore at the old cuss?"

"'Sore—because he gave me a home instead of sending me off to an orphanage? Sore—because he took me into his great heart and sheltered me with his unselfish love; because I've lived in the only place where I could have

met—my elerphunt man? Oh, Uncle Jerry! Dear, good Goosie who thinks he is bad! How can you!”

“But,” broke in Jeremy peering anxiously into her lifted face, “it ain’t been no *home*, this place where he’s kept you!”

“Hasn’t it?” Joan’s eyes grew mellow. “Oh, my dear, dear Jerryman! It’s been *home*, with lots and lots of uncles and aunts and—sisters and brothers. And you—you have been father and mother to me. You’ve loved me, and worked for me, and spoiled me.” She caught up one of the square, calloused hands and pressed her lips to it.

“But the circus. You—you are a—a curate’s girl, and, and—” Jeremy’s thick, rugged throat ached oddly and great beads of perspiration were running down his florid, seamy old face. Almost roughly he withdrew his hand from the soft little palms; but a warm spot throbbled where his idol’s lips had touched it.

“A circus wa’n’t no kind of home for a gospel-preacher’s daughter,” he argued with pathetic craftiness.

“There could never have been a better! Even *he*—and he must know up there—could have asked for no better care for me than I have had, dear.” Joan reached up and patted a moist, stubbled cheek; then, pushing aside the limp, shapeless cap, she ran her slim fingers into the shock of damp, grizzled hair.

“But,” went on Jeremy with unconscious cunning, “you and your elerphunt man’ll want to go off by yourselves and won’t be a-wantin’ nobody else.”

Something overflowed the faded blue eyes and trickled unheeded down the furrows of the twitching cheeks.

"Uncle Jerry!" Joan cried reproachfully, "as if any place on earth would ever be home to me without you! I reckon we'll stay on here for a while; but," dreamily, "some day we—we'll have a—a home with a yard and *flowers*, and a white picket fence with a little swinging gate, and—and a wide porch, and green shutters, and a regular roof that doesn't have to be paraffined, and a lot of thing-a-ma-jigs to set on shelves and mantels, and—brooms and dusters, and—and——"

"A lot of fool things that nobody wants but which everybody has!" For an instant there was almost real laughter in Jerimy's voice; then again it grew thick and husky. "It'll be fine, honey, only they—they won't be no room for a old fool what's never learned to set comfortable-like on anything but camp stools."

Joan raised herself on the tips of her dainty toes and taking his face between her two hands smiled at him coaxingly.

"It'll be *your home*, Uncle Jerry, and Phil and I will be your family. I—I reckon you'll 'most have your hands full looking after us. I reckon neither one of us is safe without you to—to kind of—of run the show." Her voice broke in a half sob.

Jerimy held his eager arms determinedly to his sides, though they ached to gather their loved little idol close.

"But Philip," he said deprecatingly, cautiously drawing her on, "*he* won't want a battered old plug like me——"

"*Won't he?*"

Somebody caught his shoulders from behind and whirled him unexpectedly round.

"Won't he, I say?" Philip Dorset laughed as he had not laughed in years, yet his laughter was queerly tear-laden. "Jeremy Kennerly! You belong to Joan and me. Do you hear? And you're going wherever we go, and you'll do whatever we do. Understand?"

Jeremy would have made a dissenting gesture, but Joan caught his hand mid-air.

"Put your arms around me, Uncle Jerry. I want you to—to wish me happiness. You're my mother and father, you know, and I—I want you to—to bless me, Uncle Jerry. To take me in your arms like—like *they* would if they were here, and say—*things* to me."

And then she was on Jeremy Kennerly's pounding-almost-to-bursting heart, and she was crying softly while Jeremy's powerful arms held her close.

Jeremy raised his ragged brows and stared through them at his old bantering companion, the moon. There was a shy, abashed, wet look in his filmy eyes, and his wrinkled lips moved mutely.

Philip looked on at them with a moisture gathering in his own gray eyes and a great warmth flooding him, body and soul. After a time he put out a hand and laid it tenderly on the small bronze head; and as though he had called her, Joan raised her face to his.

"Go, dear, and dress. I'll wait for you here."

Joan glanced down at her gauzy chiffons, and made a little *moue*; then without a word she lifted her lips to Jeremy, who bent his grizzled old head proudly and touched them with the very heart of his great body; and, smiling through a dewy joyousness at Philip, she was gone

The two men stood silent until the slender figure was lost to sight; then Philip broke suddenly into a monologue of gratitude.

For several minutes Jerimy endured it shame-facedly. Then, fumbling at his heavy watch-chain nervously, he interrupted the eulogy with an angry snort.

"Demmit! Can't a man hold a full house and a flush, of which they is two aces, 'thout somebody a-lookin' on over his shoulder and congratulatin' him?"

Off by the dressing-tent was a faint halloo. Then more distinctly came a shrill, boyish whistle.

Mechanically the two men turned their heads.

Again came the whistle, shrill, boyish, imperative.

Philip Dorset turned back to Jerimy, and grasping one of Jerimy's hands he pressed it with his long muscular fingers until pain would have shot up Jerimy's arm had his brain at the moment been capable of registering a physical sensation; and with a heart too full for words he strode eagerly off in the direction from whence came that whistled call—the call which his ears had once known so well, and for which they had so hungered in the long, dreary months just past.

Jerimy watched him go, standing perfectly still, just as Philip had left him, and once more hot streams plowed through the furrows of his weather-beaten cheeks, and his throat was tight and choking.

The whistling ceased abruptly, and as Jerimy stared out over the half-lighted lot two figures came into view, merged and were one. The smaller, slighter one had been gathered up by the other.

Jerimy dropped his eyes conscientiously. And if a

twinge of something not quite joyous tugged at his heart, he ignored it entirely, for was not this his night of Thanksgiving? Had not Joan learned of her father and mother? Had not her elerphunt man come to claim her? And God! (there was a God—he knowed it now!) hadn't she told him that she *wanted* him; that they couldn't no place be *home* to her 'thout him?

If—if he only knowed a decent, that is, a reg'lar grown-up-people's prayer, he reckoned he'd come darn near to sayin' it right now. He reckoned it'd let off some of the happiness that was just about bustin' him. But he didn't, and they wa'n't nothin' else that'd do, 'less'n it was tobacco. And he sure had a pouch full of grown-up-people's tobacco.

He took from his pocket his cheap, foul-smelling pipe, gazed at it dreamily for a moment, put it in his mouth and filled it with tobacco from a soiled bag; then he struck a match on a leg of his trousers and cupping a broad, hairy hand, lighted the pipe slowly, while his thatched brows moved steadily upward until they were almost touching the edge of his unkempt gray hair.

A cricket chirped near the rope at the end of the lot. Something had disturbed it. Canvas flapped gently with a breath of night wind. From the canine tent came a quick, sharp bark of a dreaming dog. A low, indistinct buzzing came from the Big Top. A distant automobile horn sounded a note of luxury. The muffled clang of a street-car bell gave warning at a crossing. Roustabouts called softly to each other over by the padroom. And within the horse tent an impatient Ted whinnied reproachfully.

The world was going on just as it had always gone on, and there was no pause in its routine, yet joy and peace in all their glorious splendor had just descended upon the lot of the "Greatest on Earth."

A sweet, gurgling laugh rose in its musical rippling away above those other sounds. A man's low notes rose to join it.

Jeremy, Peace and Joy in his heart, the odor of nicotine and tan-bark in his nostrils, turned his face toward the music of happiness; and there beyond the canine tent he saw them.

They were coming back to him, Joan and her beloved elephant man; and Jeremy, glancing hastily about as though in search of any undestroyed remnants of those less happy days, caught sight of his abandoned leather bag, so stoutly strapped and buckled for that long journey it was destined never to take, the journey that would have led him away from Heaven; and he kicked it sharply with the toe of a coarse, heavy boot.

"What are you hangin' around for? Do you think you can slip one over on St. Peter?" he asked, glowering at it from behind a hedge of lowered brows. "Beat it!" he ordered, and lifting with the toe that had kicked it the worn leather bag—which was obviously tragically empty—he sent it whizzing far beyond the ropes into a world less divine.

Then, thrusting his short thumbs under his elastic braces, he leaned back his huge head and, staring with a tremulously triumphant smile at the calm, immobile moon, he waited for the coming of those two who *belonged to him*—the little bronze idol who had thrown her

lot in with his that long ago night in London, and the man whose liberty he had restored.

The bluish lips puckered until a score or more of vertical lines corrugated them; then out across the lot to the two who belonged to him went a bar of his one threadbare tune, and for the first time in all its long, uncertain career, it was truthful. For the first time it was born of the happiness it simulated.

The moon looked down and wondered, and the two coming closer to the source of the song paused for a moment and looked into each other's faces with tear-dimmed eyes. They did not wonder. They understood.

"Uncle Jerimy!" breathed Joan reverently, straining her ears to catch each note of the bar that was no longer uncertain but sweetly true and clear.

"Home Sweet Home," whispered Philip, touching his lips to the sunset hair that brushed his shoulder.

And together the little bronze idol of the Greatest on Earth and her "arful big elerphunt man" went hand in hand to old Jerimy Kennerly and his "Home Sweet Home."

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